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Abstract

Derrida, Freud, Lacan: Resistances

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This dissertation presents an attempt to work through Jacques Derrida's sustained engagement with psychoanalysis—in particular, his writings on Freud and on Jacques Lacan—from one end of his work to the other. It elaborates a new critical reading of Derrida's work organized around his repeated returns to the enigmatic figure of the death drive in Freud, one of the least considered aspects of Derrida's thinking. The death drive, I show, is Freud's attempt to envision a force present in the living, but antithetical to life, a drive opposed to the drives that sustain organic life. At the same time, Freud views this death or destruction drive as a type of aggressivity central to the formation culture. Tracking Derrida's thinking on the death drive across his work, I demonstrate how this figure and the notion of “life death” it suggests come to be at the center of Derrida's engagement with Freud. Through close readings of Derrida's work, I trace how he reads Freud's writing against itself, locating there something Freud himself does not entirely think through. The dissertation argues that an understanding of Derrida's thinking on the death drive equally allows us to reassess his relationship to Lacan, pointing to a certain proximity between Derrida and Lacan readers have consistently missed.

What emerges from this reading of Derrida's work is a different perspective on Freud's theory, one that entails a reconfiguration of our basic conceptions of life and death. Death, here, is not opposed to the life drives, but internal to them, so that life is inherently divided against itself. On this view, life is haunted by a kind of "death" that continually disturbs it. At the same time, this reading sheds light on the profound ethical questions raised in Freud's thinking on this death or destruction drive.

Turning to Derrida's late work on Freud and the moral law of "civilization," written at a moment he began to explicitly address notions of justice and responsibility, I outline how Derrida finds in Freud a rethinking of ethics as it has traditionally been conceived. The dissertation argues that in thinking life and death, ethics and violence, as constitutively bound up with one another, Derrida's return to Freud alters our inherited ways of understanding these terms.

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Introduction

Already in the earliest stages of what came to be known as “deconstruction,” Derrida was reading and rereading Freud. Initially delivered as a lecture at the *Institut de psychanalyse* and published in *Tel Quel* in 1966, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida’s first sustained discussion of Freud, explicitly addressed a debate between Derrida and Freud that was already emerging at that moment around “certain propositions,” as Derrida put it, concerning writing and the trace advanced in two long essays, published in 1965 and early in 1966 in *Critique*, that would ultimately form the first, programmatic half of *Of Grammatology* (the second half devoted largely to a reading of Rousseau).¹ Both of these texts—“Freud and the Scene of Writing” in *Writing and Difference* and *Grammatology*—would then appear in print together a year later in 1967, the same year in which *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida’s major work on Husserl, was published. At the very beginning, then, Derrida was already engaging with Freud, and differentiating his own project from Freud’s. The repression of writing since Plato in the tradition of Western metaphysics was not to be understood in terms of the Freudian concept of repression, Derrida said in “Freud and the Scene of Writing”—on the contrary, it must be understood as in some sense prior to the Freudian concept of repression, Derrida

¹ Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 196. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

insisted—just as the deconstructive concepts of the “archi-trace” and *différance* were said to be definitely not Freudian.

The relation to Freud that Derrida then acknowledged in everything that followed the preliminary remarks in “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” however, was more complicated, and more difficult to assess. For when Derrida sets out to track the metaphors of writing in Freud’s work in this essay, it becomes clear that what he is doing is uncovering in Freud a thinking of the mnemonic trace, of time (with the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* or “deferred action”), and of life and death—registered under the heading of “all that Freud...thought about the unity of life and death” (FSW, 227), a unity Derrida would later attempt to capture with the term “life death”—that cannot be easily situated within the tradition of Western metaphysics. But it is equally clear in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” that, for Derrida, Freud remains bound to this tradition. What Derrida finds in the famous “Note on the ‘Mystic Pad’” (1925) is Freud ultimately disavowing what all the metaphors of writing suggest, namely that death (and the machine) might actually belong to the order of life in the psyche, rather than being excluded from it, as Freud seems to Derrida to prefer. For Derrida, then, “Freud performs for us the scene of writing” (FSW, 229), without this being something that Freud himself ever fully thinks through, without this performance being the explicit aim of Freud’s work.

“Freud and the Scene of Writing” marked not just any moment in Derrida’s early work, however, as the lecture delivered in January of 1968, the famous lecture on “*Différance*,” would make clear.² Indeed, when Derrida presented this text (published in a volume of writing from *Tel Quel* the same year, included in *Margins of Philosophy* in 1972) that would become, along with “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), one of the most well-known texts of “deconstruction,” Freud would occupy a crucial position there.³ This is an important text, given the way it came to be associated not only with the early deconstruction of “logocentrism” as Derrida called it—that is, with deconstruction in one of its earliest incarnations, before there emerged a whole series of terms that Derrida would ultimately call “impossible concepts,” “quasi-concepts,” or “quasi-transcendentals”⁴ such as “dissemination,” “pharmakon,” “stricture,” “gift,” and so on (indeed, the very proliferation of terms within an in principle endless series calling into question their status as “transcendentals”)—but with deconstruction full stop.

What the notion of *différance* invokes, Derrida says in this lecture, is something like an irreducible operation which is not a founding principle, an operation at the heart of the sign and writing, but also, Derrida suggests, at the heart of consciousness.

² Jacques Derrida, “*Différance*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

³ Geoffrey Bennington, a very careful reader of Derrida’s and a helpful guide in this territory, has remarked, for example, that Derrida “devote[s] to Freud, alongside Heidegger and Levinas, some very important pages in the seminal text ‘La Différance.’” Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), 96.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Resistances,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically

Différance is not really a thing, he suggests; it is, rather, a kind of originary process or movement. Initially, it is thinkable in terms of a certain temporality, as a kind of perpetual deferral or detour. But it is also to be thought, he continues, in terms of the notion of difference, as in the difference between things that separates one thing from another. Such a notion of difference implies what Derrida calls “spacing,” the interval or distance between different things. Derrida famously describes *différance* as “the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time, the ‘originary constitution’ of time and space, as metaphysics or transcendental phenomenology would say” (D, 8), and it is clear that he sees this operation at work within what is known as consciousness. Consciousness ought to be understood, Derrida suggests, not as a self-standing function, but rather as an effect of *différance*.⁵

And yet Derrida attributes this notion to Nietzsche and to Freud, “both of whom, as is well known, and sometimes in a very similar fashion, put consciousness into question in its assured certainty of itself,” and did so, “on the basis of the motif of *différance*” (D, 17). Unlike Nietzsche, however, Freud’s thinking touches on “the point of greatest obscurity, on the very enigma of *différance*” (D, 19), according to Derrida—at the moment Freud begins to advance the hypothesis of a drive towards death. Derrida is referring here to the theory of the death drive Freud put forward in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), where he began to reconsider the idea that the psychic apparatus is governed by the pursuit of pleasure and “the reality principle,” which

⁵ As Derrida puts it, “A determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*...” (D, 16).

may demand the postponement of pleasure in view of the exigencies of life. In the years after the Great War, however, the recurrence of traumatic and unpleasurable experiences Freud began to observe in the analytic treatment—Freud would come to call this the compulsion to repeat—lead him to speculate on the possibility that there may be some other psychic force at work “beyond the pleasure principle.” In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the highly “instinctual” character of the repetition compulsion⁶ ultimately leads Freud to posit the existence of another drive working in opposition to the sexual drives and the self-preservative drives. These drives are now renamed Eros or the life drives, and beyond these, there is the death drive, *Todestrieb*, a “silent,” disruptive force pushing towards the extinction of all excitation within the living organism.

Invoking the speculative project of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida is heading, as we shall see, into some of the most difficult territory in Freud’s work—I dwell on the theory of the death drive and what it suggests to Derrida in detail in the chapters that follow—but here I simply want to show that Derrida sees in this *différance* at work. What he finds in Freud is the notion that psychic life consists in, on the one side, the pursuit of pleasure and its continual deferment or postponement, and on the other, “*différance* as the relation to an impossible presence...as the

⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 volumes (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74). Hereafter cited parenthetically. This citation is from SE 18: 35.

irreparable loss of presence...that is, as the death instinct” (D, 19). Indeed, Derrida ultimately sees this logic glimpsed in the very notion of the unconscious itself.

A certain alterity—to which Freud gives the metaphysical name of the unconscious—is definitively exempt from every process of presentation by means of which we would call upon it to show itself in person. In this context, and beneath this guise, the unconscious is not, as we know, a hidden, virtual, or potential self-presence. It differs from, and defers, itself; which doubtless means that it is woven of differences, and also that it sends out delegates, representatives, proxies; but without any chance that the giver of proxies might “exist,” might be present, be “itself” somewhere... In this sense, contrary to the terms of an old debate full of the metaphysical investments that it has always assumed, the “unconscious” is no more a “thing” than it is any other thing, is no more a thing than it is a virtual or masked consciousness. (D, 21)

Freud’s discourse, Derrida suggests, then, gestures towards a certain radical alterity, but in the very moment that it does so, we should note, it gives this alterity a metaphysical name.⁷

We see in these two early texts an approach to reading Freud—whereby Derrida locates in Freud something he himself did not think through—that can be traced in all of Derrida’s subsequent writing on Freud. This dissertation represents an attempt to reassess this body of work from one end to the other. It elaborates a critical reading of Derrida’s work organized around his repeated returns to the enigmatic figure of the death drive he is already exploring in these early texts. Indeed, as we shall see, the figure of the death drive comes to be at the center of Derrida’s sustained engagement with Freud across a series of texts. It is equally, I argue in what follows, at the center

⁷ As Derrida writes a few pages later, “The annunciating and reserved trace of this movement [the movement of *différance*] can always be disclosed in metaphysical discourse...” (D, 23).

of Derrida's dealings with the work of Lacan.⁸ As I indicated in a preliminary way above, the death drive is Freud's name for a force present in the living, but antithetical to life, in fundamental conflict with the drives aimed at sustaining organic life. At the same time, Freud envisions what he sometimes calls the death or destruction drive as a type of aggressivity central to the formation culture. If Derrida came to focus on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the figure of the death drive, it is because, as he wrote nearly thirty years after "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in the theory of the death drive "Freudian psychoanalysis found both its resource and its limit" (R, 32).

I say this dissertation presents an attempt to "reassess" Derrida's work on psychoanalysis not because I take issue with the prevailing interpretation outlined by Derrida's readers—simply put, there is no prevailing interpretation insofar as this aspect of Derrida's thinking has been almost entirely ignored.⁹ Geoffrey Bennington

⁸ Lacan is not the only post-Freudian Derrida engaged; he was also interested in the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. See Jacques Derrida, "Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok," trans. Barbara Johnson, foreword to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), xi–xlvi. See also Jacques Derrida, "Me—Psychoanalysis," trans. Richard Klein, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Vol. 1*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 129–142. This dissertation, however, looks at texts that have been undertheorized in work on Derrida, whereas quite a bit has been said about Derrida's relationship to Abraham and Torok's work. See, for instance, Stephen Melville, *Philosophy Beside Itself* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and Maud Ellmann, "Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis," in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 211–237.

⁹ While there are, of course, works that treat certain of Derrida's readings of Freud and Lacan (though the most crucial of these, Derrida's reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in *The Post Card*, which I analyze in detail in Chapter 1, remains fairly well untouched), there are only a handful of works that look at Derrida's sustained engagement with psychoanalysis. See Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000); Maud Ellmann, "Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis," in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 211–237; and René Major, *Lacan avec Derrida: Analyse Désistentielle* (Paris: Éditions Menta, 1991). There is

has done some important work in this area: picking up on a kind of tension inhabiting Derrida's dealings with Freud, he argues that Derrida's complex relationship to Freud is crucial to deconstruction itself, to the way deconstruction thinks through its own complicated position vis-à-vis the tradition it sets out to dismantle or deconstruct.¹⁰ And yet, I do not so much take issue with his reading of Derrida as much as I try to build on it, in order to explore what is at stake in Derrida's work on psychoanalysis: a rethinking of the relation between life and death. I seek to "reassess" Derrida's work on psychoanalysis, then, insofar I develop a critical reading of this work that attempts to go beyond how Derrida himself described the relation between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. While the dissertation aims to sketch out and clarify the way Derrida reads Freud and Lacan, the reading strategy it employs is critical and analytical.¹¹ I analyze Derrida's writing not only in terms of what it explicitly says, but also in terms of what, at certain key moments, it does not recognize. This reading strategy mirrors the one employed by Derrida himself.

What emerges from this reading of Derrida is a different perspective on the death drive, one that entails a reconfiguration of our basic conceptions of life and death. Death, on this view, is not opposed to the life drives, but internal to them; to put it

some discussion of Derrida's dealings with Freud and Lacan in Andrea Hurst's *Derrida vis-à-vis Lacan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), but this is secondary to her project of positing a more general philosophical correspondence between Derrida and Lacan. This is also Michael Lewis's project in *Derrida and Lacan: Another Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), though there Lacan is said to go somewhat beyond Derrida on the general philosophical question of transcendental foundations.

¹⁰ Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, 100.

¹¹ My reading strategy is also highly attentive to the way Derrida's thinking develops over time. My goal is to track Derrida's dealings with psychoanalysis across the different stages of his work.

another way, life is inherently divided against itself. At the same time, the theory of the death or destruction drive raises profound ethical questions. Ethics and the moral injunction of “civilization,” Freud theorizes, have their origins not in some higher ideal but rather in a kind of fundamental, violent aggressivity “man” turns back on himself. Thus I am concerned as well in the dissertation with Derrida’s suggestive work on the problematic of ethics in Freud’s thinking, written in the last ten years of Derrida’s life, when he began explicitly to address questions of justice, responsibility, and law. The dissertation argues that in thinking life and death, ethics and violence as constitutively bound up with one another, Derrida’s return to Freud alters our inherited ways of understanding these terms. Ultimately, it suggests that life is haunted by a kind of “death” that disturbs it.

Chapter 1 looks at Derrida’s important work on the repetition compulsion and the death drive in *The Post Card* (1980). For Derrida, I show, another logic of repetition, other than the one Freud invokes, inhabits Freud’s text, threatening the fundamental opposition between the life drives and the death drive. Reading Freud’s text against itself, Derrida attempts to rethink this opposition in terms of the logic of what he calls “life-death.” But in so doing, I argue, Derrida himself cannot quite do justice to a certain ambivalence at work in Freud’s text. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. A persistent ambivalence that can be traced in Freud’s text, I show, works to put into question the very opposition between life and death the text seems to want to set up. What Derrida’s reading of *Beyond* ultimately makes legible, then, is in part Derrida’s

resistance to psychoanalysis—one that emerges at certain key moments in Derrida’s subsequent writing on Freud.

Chapter 2 presents an attempt to work through Derrida’s critique of Lacan. Looking at a series of texts that extend from the early seventies to the nineties, I reassess Derrida’s sustained engagement with Lacan. Derrida attempts to show that, despite Lacan’s explicit claims to displace a traditional philosophical conception of the subject and its relation to language, Lacan’s linguistically oriented psychoanalysis does not really break with that tradition. Yet Lacan rethinks the concepts of the repetition compulsion and the death drive in crucial ways, I argue. Drawing on Lacan’s analysis of Freud’s early writings, I demonstrate how Lacan theorizes the death drive in terms of the repetitive insistence of a lifeless symbolic structure: an inanimate linguistic function that is, in Lacan’s words, “beyond the limits of life,” mortifying what it inhabits. On this view, what Freud called the “death drive” designates something, in the animate, that intrudes on and disturbs life. This radical rethinking of the death drive, I argue, reveals a proximity between Derrida and Lacan that scholars have consistently missed.

Chapter 3 looks at Derrida’s later return to Freud in the 1990s, in particular his later engagement with the death drive and the psychoanalytic concept of resistance. Analyzing the place of “resistance to analysis” in the history of psychoanalysis, Derrida once again rereads Freud, from the inaugural analysis of a specimen dream in

The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) to his late work on the intractable form of resistance posed by the compulsion to repeat and the death drive. On this reading, the death drive emerges as “the most resistant resistance.” It plays the part of a resistance par excellence, an irreducible obstacle that will never be overcome or dissolved. And yet, as a purely unconscious drive, it performs its work always and everywhere “in silence,” as Freud puts it, spreading itself out into places that Freud, at the end of his life, can no longer specify. Taking up this analysis of Freud, I read Derrida with and against the grain. I demonstrate how psychoanalysis, as a method of analysis, thus encounters a kind of interminable resistance “to itself”—what Derrida calls an “auto-immune” resistance at the heart of psychoanalysis. But I also attempt to show how the logic of autoimmunity offers a way of rethinking what Freud calls the death drive. What the death drive figures, Derrida suggests, is not another force opposed to life, but rather the way life is disrupted from within.

The fourth and final chapter explores Derrida’s late work on the ethical implications of the Freudian theory of the death drive. The death drive, Freud theorized in his late “sociological” works, is in fact at the very center of the formation of culture. Across a series of his later works—from *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) to his final major work, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939)—Freud locates the origin of the moral law in the aggression one turns back on oneself. In this chapter, I trace how Derrida rereads Freud’s thinking on the death drive and the moral law. In this reading of Freud, I argue, we see Derrida attempting to rethink ethics according to the same

logic that sees life as threatened from within, the logic of “autoimmunity”—whereby violence is bound up with justice and what Derrida calls “ethical decision.”

Analyzing Derrida’s work in this phase, I read it alongside Lacan’s reconsideration of ethics in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. I outline how Derrida and Lacan attempt to rethink the condition of ethics in similar terms, and I consider what this suggests about how we ought to approach the question of ethics today, after Freud.

Finally, I would like to offer a remark on the title of this work. While the names “Derrida,” “Freud,” “Lacan” each appear in this title—in a form that suggests to me not so much an ordered sequence as much as a kind of overlapping or entanglement—I want to underscore that this dissertation is, above all, a reappraisal of Derrida’s work. Hence the placement of this name in the string: this dissertation is ultimately a dissertation on Derrida, on Derrida’s dealings with the father of psychoanalysis and a key figure in psychoanalysis after Freud, most especially in France.¹² As for the term “Resistances,” as I hope will become clear in the chapters that follow, this term invokes the two forms Derrida’s resistance to psychoanalysis might be said to take, referring to the way Derrida explicitly and consistently takes his distance from Freud,

¹² Derrida spoke most explicitly about the importance of coming to terms with Lacan in “For the Love of Lacan,” a lecture delivered at a major conference on “*Lacan avec les philosophes*” in 1990. There Derrida says the following: “Whether one is talking about philosophy, psychoanalysis, or theory in general, what the flat-footed restoration underway attempts to recover, disavow, or censor is the fact that nothing of that which managed to transform the space of thought in the last decades would have been possible without some coming to terms *with* Lacan, without the Lacanian provocation, however one receives it or discusses it—and, I will add, without coming to terms *with* Lacan in his coming to terms *with* the philosophers.” Jacques Derrida, “For the Love of Lacan,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 46.

but also to a certain unanalyzed resistance to psychoanalysis inhabiting Derrida's writing. At the same time, this term indirectly refers to what, in the course of Derrida's reading of Freud, will emerge as the "*most resistant resistance*" itself, resistance par excellence, the death drive. Beyond these resonances, the way in which the concept of the death drive seems itself to resist traditional modes of thinking about death and its relation to life is equally part of what this dissertation attempts to explore.

Chapter 1: The “Other Logic” of Repetition: Derrida and Freud

In a dialogue with Elisabeth Roudinesco from 2001, Derrida expressed a certain fondness for the analyst Sandor Ferenczi’s idea of a Society for the Friends of Psychoanalysis. The phrase “friend of psychoanalysis,” Derrida suggested, implies a kind of affirmation, but it also includes a certain distance: “It evokes the freedom of an alliance, an engagement with no institutional status. The friend maintains the reserve, withdrawal, or distance necessary for critique, for discussion, for reciprocal questioning, sometimes the most radical of all.”¹ The position of the friend, then, it seems, and the position of deconstruction *vis-à-vis* psychoanalysis, is never entirely simple. The highest form of friendship for Derrida, one begins to suspect, is one that entails continual negotiation and critique. Indeed, the affirmation *of* critique, the affirmation which consists in critique, in the insistence on what of the “Freudian revolution” still remains to be carried out:

“The friend” is the one who approves, acquiesces, affirms the ineffaceable necessity of psychoanalysis, that is, above all, of its future-to-come, but who is also interested in the problematic, sometimes artificial, artifactual, and therefore deconstructible and perfectible character of the relations between psychoanalysis and its right, as between its theory and its practice, between the necessity of knowledge and its institutional inscription, between the public space of psychoanalysis and the absolute originality of its “secret” place... (FWT, 168)

¹ Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow...A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 167. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

And this would seem to describe, then, Derrida's own relation to psychoanalysis. For as Derrida repeated in so many ways, there could be no such thing as deconstruction without psychoanalysis.² And yet he also insisted, at the same time, that what is called "deconstruction" is irreducible to a form of psychoanalysis.

Almost from the beginning, Derrida says in this same dialogue, deconstruction found in psychoanalysis certain resources that it used to support a different form of questioning. "But the 'friend of psychoanalysis,'" he continues, "faced with so many metaphysical schemas at work in the Freudian and Lacanian projects, remained on his guard" (FWT, 171). And this is why, it would seem, for Derrida the position of the friend was always maintained at a certain distance. But if deconstruction "guards" itself in its dealings with psychoanalysis, this might also be, I want to suggest, for reasons other than those that Derrida himself indicated. Given the frequency with which Derrida returned to Freud in his work—without ever quite being done with him—it is hard not to think that there may be another complication here, beyond the one Derrida spoke or thought about in his work on Freud, a kind of *resistance* to Freud.

Certainly, Derrida never thought of the relation between deconstruction and psychoanalysis as one that was not somehow complicated. In his early work, in "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Derrida characterized the relationship between

² Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 83.

deconstruction and psychoanalysis primarily in terms of the relation to metaphysics: the critical project of deconstruction, it was said, registers the manner in which Freudian concepts “without exception, belong to the history of metaphysics.”³ *Without exception*, then, it would seem, Freudian concepts belong to a system predicated on a series of constitutive exclusions. But what Derrida actually *says* in the opening of “Freud and the Scene of Writing” in fact complicates matters considerably. Geoffrey Bennington’s careful analysis of this passage is crucial here.⁴ For as Bennington underscores, Derrida amends his initial statement on psychoanalysis and metaphysics almost immediately, in order to take account of the manner in which Freud uses metaphysical concepts.

Certainly, Freudian discourse—in its syntax, or, if you will, its labor—is not to be confused with these necessarily metaphysical and traditional concepts. Certainly it is not exhausted by belonging to them. Witness the precautions and “nominalism” with which Freud manipulates what he calls conventions and conceptual hypotheses. And a conception of difference is attached less to concepts than to discourse. (FSW, 197–8)

Despite appearances, then, it is not that psychoanalysis belongs, completely, within the horizon of the history of metaphysics. Psychoanalysis is not “exhausted” by its belonging to this history; even as it inherits a series of metaphysical concepts, Derrida suggests, psychoanalysis is not simply reducible to them.

³ Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 197. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁴ Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), 97–102. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

But then, having noted the incompleteness of this belonging, Derrida specifies the problem, the issue with psychoanalysis from the standpoint of deconstruction. The problem is, Derrida writes, “Freud never reflected upon the historical and theoretical sense of these precautions” (FSW, 198). What differentiates deconstruction and psychoanalysis, it would seem, is not the manner in which the one or the other simply belongs, or does not belong, to metaphysics. Rather, it is that Freud did not reflect on, did not think through, psychoanalysis’s own relationship of belonging to the metaphysical tradition and, in turn, the “sense”—the import, and the necessity—of its rearticulation of metaphysical concepts.⁵ This would be, it appears, what differentiates psychoanalysis and deconstruction: that psychoanalysis does not reflect on, does not take up, its own “metaphysical complications” (FSW, 198). And it is precisely insofar as these complications remain unthought, apparently, that psychoanalysis is not deconstruction, which ensures that “Despite appearances, the deconstruction of logocentrism is not a psychoanalysis of philosophy” (FSW, 196).

What differentiates psychoanalysis and deconstruction, Derrida thus suggests, is above all the manner in which deconstruction attempts to think through, to *analyze*, its own complicated relation to metaphysics. Despite, that is, their common inheritance, which as Derrida specified nearly thirty years later in “Resistances,” is the logic internal to any and every form of analysis: the “double motif” of the

⁵ See Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, 101.

archaeological and the dissociative.⁶ The axiomatics of analysis, indeed the word itself, imply for Derrida a double orientation. On the one hand, it contains an anagogical or *archaeological* motif, figuring—conceptually and philologically—the movement of a recurrent return to “the origin”; a return to the originary insofar as it is primary and elementary—insofar as it figures “the simplest, the elementary, or the detail that cannot be broken down” (R, 19). On the other hand, there is what Derrida calls the “philolytic” tendency or exigency. The term “philolytic,” underscoring the etymological sense of the word “analysis” as untying, unweaving, or unbinding, names for Derrida the fundamentally dissociative movement of analysis as a kind of breaking down, deriving, undoing, and dissolving, including in the sense of dissolving a knot and thereby resolving a problem (R, 19–20). In other words, the *archaeological* orientation of analysis is interlaced here with a tendency towards undoing which nevertheless retains the consoling possibility and promise of ultimate completion, an “*eschatological*” finality (R, 20). Consequently, the very logic of analysis includes a type of internal tension, insofar as analysis is figured here as *simultaneously dissociative and teleological*. As long as the tendency to continually break down and dissolve persists, the pursuit of the origin, that at which the regressive return would come to a halt, will never achieve closure. An ineradicable tension, Derrida suggests, inhabits any and every notion of analysis, including that which Freud, and Derrida, must inherit.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Resistances,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 27. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

The difference between psychoanalysis and deconstruction, in this case, would be only that deconstruction attempts to think through this complication, as its own. What came to be called “deconstructive genealogy”⁷ places the stress on the philolytic motif—in Derrida’s words, “*desedimenting, decomposing, deconstituting* sediments, *artefacta*, presuppositions, institutions” (R, 27)—but to privilege the work of dissociative unbinding, Derrida insists, is not enough. What is required is a critique of the axiomatics of analysis that simultaneously puts the principle of this critique into question. That is, a reflexive gesture that turns genealogical critique back on itself, in order to analyze the very genealogical principle to which it adheres. Deconstruction complicates the critico-genealogical tendency, in short, by *radicalizing* it, such that, in Derrida’s words,

What is put in question by its work is not only the possibility of recapturing the originary but also the desire to do so or the phantasm of doing so, the desire to rejoin the simple, whatever that may be, or the phantasm of such a reunion. (R, 27)

In continually putting this desire into question, it would seem, deconstruction opens up for itself the space of a critical distance *vis-à-vis* psychoanalysis. But psychoanalysis, Derrida thus suggests, will not have reflected on, will not have relinquished, the desire or the fantasy of “the reunion with the originary, the simple”—even if it is not exhausted by it. Or rather, it will not have thought through this fantasy *as fantasy*, and *this* would be, finally, what differentiates deconstruction and psychoanalysis. And it would be, then, the singular task of Derrida’s sustained

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 18.

reading of Freud to register what disturbs this fantasy of the simple. One name for this, Derrida suggested in *The Post Card*, is “repetition compulsion.”⁸

Repetition Compulsion

Beginning with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the “repetition compulsion” named for Freud the insistent repetition of a psychic experience of trauma or unpleasure: revising the model of the psyche that had to that point dominated his theory, Freud began in 1920 to ascribe greater significance to the recurrence of such experiences, in the analytic treatment—Freud speaks of the repeated recurrence of scarring psychic material—and in dreams, in traumatic dreams that seem to continually return the dreamer to the scene of the accident. As a repetition that brings with it no possibility of pleasure, the compulsion to repeat lead Freud to speculate on the possibility of something “beyond the pleasure principle,” of a drive more primitive than the pursuit of pleasure said to govern psychic life: that is, the speculative hypothesis of the so-called “death drive.” A drive towards death which is older than, *more originary* than the pleasure principle it would then oppose or contradict. If Freud named what lies beyond the pleasure principle the death drive, it was because this tendency seemed to indicate to him a drive to reduce excitation within the psychic apparatus to a kind of absolute zero, an absolute absence of excitation Freud came to associate with the state of inorganic quiescence. But the regressive character of the compulsion to repeat

⁸ Derrida, in fact, repeatedly returns to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in his later work, after *The Post Card*, most notably in *Archive Fever* (1996), all of the texts in *Resistances* (1998), and “Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of a Sovereign Cruelty” (in *Without Alibi* [2000]).

equally suggested to Freud that this tendency pushes towards a return to a prior state; in which case, Freud speculated, what the death drive pursues is in fact an original quiescence prior to life. The death drive, then, seemed to Freud to seek a return to this initial state, working against what he began to call the life drives—the self-preservative and sexual drives—struggling with them “from the very first” (SE 18: 61).

In “To Speculate—on ‘Freud,’” Derrida’s reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* came to be centered, then, on the manner in which Freud’s text repeatedly attempts to identify, to “speculate on,” a beyond of the pleasure principle—in Derrida’s words, “the totally-other (*than* the pleasure principle)”⁹—but continually fails in this task, fails to make any progress on this beyond or other of pleasure. And in this failure, actually repeats what it is attempting to theorize. It may appear that Derrida is making a merely “formal” point about Freud’s “athetic” (TS, 269) writing, but insofar as “writing” names for Derrida what has been repressed in the tradition of Western metaphysics—what he designated in his early work with the term “logocentrism”—the reading of *Beyond* is equally aimed at retracing what is glimpsed in the text as the absolute other of pleasure, but also in some sense speculatively repressed.

For Derrida, in short, what drives *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is the drive to track down some other thing, some other self-standing entity or tendency, beyond the

⁹ Jacques Derrida, “To Speculate—on ‘Freud,’” in *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 283. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

pleasure principle, what Freud will ultimately envision as a drive antithetical to life itself.¹⁰ But there is, in this very pursuit of what lies beyond the pleasure principle, Derrida insists, also something uncontrollable at work, a slippage or irreducible tension, which comes to be installed in the enigmatic and unstable concept of the death drive, and which threatens to undo the very project of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the whole metapsychology of the drives, and psychoanalysis as the thought of a pleasure opposed to unpleasure. And this cannot fail to threaten as well, Derrida attempts to show, Freud's efforts to secure the psychoanalytic legacy beyond that of its founder, to ensure its proper transmission and inheritance, if not its status as a science.

In other words, the speculative attempt to think the so-called death drive entails, on Derrida's reading, a certain unrecuperable remainder the text continually labors, and repeatedly fails, to contain. For Derrida, Freud's speculative project—the attempt to think the beyond of the pleasure principle in terms of some other thing distinct from the pleasure principle—evidences “the strict implication of being haunted” (TS, 293), persistently and despite itself undermined, or hollowed out, as if from within. And if the writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* fails, ultimately, to make any progress in the direction of the “third step” in the theory of the drives, if it can only but repeat this failure or the arrest in its advance as Derrida terms it, this is because the “totally-

¹⁰ I draw here, and throughout, on Teresa de Lauretis' helpful account of Jean Laplanche's critique of Freud and his “going astray” in the notion of the death drive. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature, and Film* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 80. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

other (*than* the pleasure principle)” (TS, 283) is actually internal to the notion of repetition Freud invokes in *Beyond*. Or rather, it is inscribed within this notion of repetition itself as the “other logic” of repetition. Because for Derrida, there are in fact two logics of repetition at work in *Beyond*. There is, interlaced with the “classical” logic of repetition as the simple repetition of the same, the repetition of an original which precedes the repetitive process, a second type of repetition: repetition as, in Samuel Weber’s phrase, “the recurrence of a difference separating that which is repeated from its repetition.”¹¹ That is, a second notion of repetition that privileges the recurrence of the moment of difference implied in any and every process of repetition: the moment of a gap between “that which is repeated” and its repetition, the space which *differentiates* them, which is necessary for the repetitive process to get underway.

But what drives Derrida’s reading of Freud? Derrida wants to say that the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* tries, repeatedly, to think this beyond in terms of some other drive or tendency, but this is undone by a kind of slippage that structures the text, that dictates its odd inability to make any progress on whatever it is that lies, finally, beyond the pleasure principle. It is, then, precisely this slippage or complication *already* at work in Freud’s text—one Freud himself does not reflect on—that Derrida’s reading of *Beyond* will seek to bring out and retrace. Derrida will, in effect, bring out in Freud’s text a certain “non-classical” logic of repetition and a

¹¹ Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud*, trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5.

rethinking of the relation between life and death, locating there something Freud himself does not think through.

But in reading Freud in this way, I think, Derrida himself at times cannot “do justice” to Freud (as Derrida will say of Foucault)¹², to a certain ambivalence, I want to suggest, operative in Freud’s speculation on the relation between the death drive and the pleasure principle. What Derrida’s reading of *Beyond* thereby makes legible, I am arguing, would be *Derrida’s resistance* to psychoanalysis: the particular tension inhabiting the complicated relations between Derrida and Freud, what Geoffrey Bennington has called a certain “problematic proximity” between deconstruction and psychoanalysis (ID, 94). A tension, then, that can be traced within the text of “To Speculate,” in the margins as it were, in certain key moments, where Derrida would seem to read in Freud a return to a metaphysical conception of the death drive that Freud’s thinking, I will suggest, equally works to put into question or complicate.

Freud’s *Fort/da*

For Derrida, I have said, Freud repeatedly fails in *Beyond* to make any progress on what lies beyond the pleasure principle, and in this way, Freud’s text repeats what it is trying to theorize: a compulsive, disruptive form of repetition that undoes any and all progress. What’s more, this repetition, the one Freud does not know he is

¹² See Jacques Derrida, ““To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

performing, is for Derrida in fact *staged* within the text, in advance of any speculative hypothesis, in the famous account of Ernst's game of *fort/da* in Chapter 2; the peculiar manner in which repetition is performed in Freud's text is, I think, central to the reading of Freud I want to analyze here. Of course, Freud's observations on his grandson's game of *fort/da* have by now been submitted to considerable analysis, and this is in itself, one begins to suspect, somehow symptomatic. If it is necessary to return to the *fort/da* game for Derrida, then, it is precisely *because*, as he puts it, the story of the spool and the *fort/da* is "too legendary" (TS, 298), in both senses of the word. On the one hand, "overburdened, obliterated" (TS, 298) by so many repeated readings and rereadings; and on the other, too much like the manifest content of a dream in that "it gives something to be read" (TS, 298) rather than communicating a given message. It demands, in its distortions and ellipses, analysis, deciphering, decoding. Thus it offers something which does not, at least not readily and without some effort in framing it as such, amount to a demonstration of the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat which would override the pleasure principle. And yet, according to Derrida, this is precisely what readings of this text have tended to miss: "since in effect a repetition compulsion seems to dominate the scene of the spool, it is believed that this story can be reattached to the exhibition, that is, the demonstration, of the so-called death drive" (TS, 294).¹³

¹³ Derrida's translator consistently modifies the Strachey translation: where Strachey has "reel" for *Spule*, Alan Bass refers to a "spool," in order to retain, it is said, the additional resonance in French of Derrida's term ("*bobine*") as "face" or "head" (TS, 313, note 15).

In fact, at the close of Chapter 2, no progress towards the demonstration of something beyond the pleasure principle has been made. The scene of the *fort/da* only serves to *confirm* the dominance of the pleasure principle. To be clear, it is not that for Derrida the story of the *fort/da* is “without import” (TS, 294), it is just that such import must be attributed to something other than the value of an example of the repetition compulsion at work, of a demonstration of the validity of the hypothesis that there is some drive which operates beyond the pleasure principle. In Derrida’s words, “it is simply that its import is perhaps not inscribed in the register of the *demonstration* whose most apparent and continuous thread is held in the question: are we correct, we psychoanalysts, to *believe* in the absolute domination of the PP? [Derrida’s abbreviation for the pleasure principle]” (TS, 294)—the question, that is, with which *Beyond* opens. Derrida thus poses the question: “Where is this import inscribed then?” (TS, 294).¹⁴ In truth, it is this question that forms the central concern of Derrida’s reading of the child’s game of *fort/da*; ultimately, Derrida will locate the import of this story of the spool in its distinct autobiographical resonance, and in turn, in a certain urgency concerning the Freudian legacy in the form of the psychoanalytic “movement.” My concern here, however, is with what Derrida identifies in the abyssal structure of the writing—whereby the text is said to do precisely what it describes, whereby what Freud does in the recounting of this scene of *fort/da* is said to “overlap” with what he says is transpiring there—as a certain attempt on Freud’s

¹⁴ I have modified Bass’s translation here, to correct (what I presume to be) a typographical error. Bass’s translation reads “Where is this import inscribed them [*sic*]?” (TS, 294).

part to negotiate everything that would seem to threaten the dominance of the pleasure principle.

Recounting the scene of the game, Freud describes the “chance opportunity which presented itself” to observe “the first game played by a little boy of one and a half and invented by himself” (SE 18: 14). Freud’s analysis of this scene will ultimately attempt to account for “the meaning of the puzzling activity” (SE 18: 14), specifically in terms of its “*economic* motive, the consideration of the yield of pleasure involved” (SE 18: 14). In this regard, his analysis would appear to correspond to what, on the very first page of *Beyond*, he called the “assumption” of the dominance of the pleasure principle in the functioning of the psychic apparatus: “In the theory of psycho-analysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle...that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure” (SE 18: 7). As for Freud’s account of the scene itself, it is, he assures us, the product of “more than a mere fleeting observation,” insofar as the analyst in fact “lived under the same roof as the child and his parents for some weeks” (SE 18: 14): the child’s mother, as is well known, was in actuality Freud’s daughter, and the author of the game Freud’s grandson, Ernst. In the domestic scene Freud presents, the father of psychoanalysis observes the grandson with whom for a time he shared a home (though not, as Derrida will underscore, a name) and to whom, he notes, “tributes were paid to his being a ‘good boy’” (SE 18:

14). And why is he called a good boy? Because “above all he never cried when his mother left him,” even though he was “greatly attached” to her (SE 18: 14).

But this good little boy had nevertheless developed “an occasional disturbing habit” (SE 18: 13). He “did not disturb his parents at night” (SE 18: 14), but he did disturb them in his play, by throwing away his toys and other small objects:

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive “o-o-o-o” [which Freud and the boy’s mother “were agreed in thinking... represented the German word ‘*fort*’ (‘gone’—trans.)”]. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful “*da*” [“there”—trans.]. This, then was the complete game—disappearance and return. (SE 18: 15)

The remainder of Chapter 2 is devoted to the problem of interpreting this scene, and Freud, in fact, offers more than one interpretation. But nowhere does Freud suggest that there might be at work here a compulsion to repeat that includes no possibility of pleasure, even if he does, momentarily and in passing, advance the possibility of a drive for mastery acting “independently” of the pleasure principle (SE 18: 16).

Consequently, at the conclusion of the chapter no progress has been made, at least with regard to “the operation of tendencies *beyond* the pleasure principle, that is, of tendencies more primitive than it and independent of it” (SE 18: 17).

But for Derrida, what is unmistakable in Freud’s account of the game is the curious surprise or regret announced in the sentence in which Freud writes “It never occurred

to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage.” In short, Derrida will read this remark in terms of a certain identification legible at the level of the writing, and this identification will prove to be absolutely central to Derrida’s reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. That is, if the remark seems to Derrida to express a kind of regret or perplexity somewhat out of place in an account whose objectivity Freud is at great pains to establish, it is first and foremost because it evidences an identification, inscribed in the text, between the interpreter and the child: “If he had been playing in his grandson’s place...the (grand)father would have played carriage” (TS, 314–315). In the account, Freud appears to place himself in the position of the child whose game he is interpreting, and thereby indicates *both* what it did not occur to the child to do with the spool *and* what he, the interpreter, would have done with it, which is to play at its being a carriage or train. The significance of this structure of identification lies, for Derrida, in the manner in which it articulates the suggestion, or wish, of a different type of game than the so-called “complete game” of disappearance and return.

To play train with the spool, Derrida speculates, would indeed be a different kind of game, one which would be defined not in terms of a motif of disappearance and return, but in terms of, precisely, presence, even if it is the presence of an object retained at slight distance from oneself. In short, in the version of the game Freud would rather Ernst have played, “This trained train does not even have to come back [*revenir*], it does not really leave. It has barely come to leave when it is going to come

back” (TS, 315, translator’s brackets). What threatens the integrity of the interpretation, and what Freud’s account attempts to contain, would be, according to Derrida, nothing other than the possibility that the game determined strictly as a game of “disappearance and return” might include disappearance with no promise of return, a form of absence which is not merely a moment in the return to presence. In short, a moment of *irreducible* absence that could not be somehow reappropriated.

The Other Logic of Repetition

What exactly is the import of this scene for Derrida, then? As Derrida reads Freud, Freud’s interpretation of the game attempts simultaneously both to think the absolutely other than the pleasure principle in the scene of the *fort/da*, and to circumscribe its destabilizing effect on the coherence of the interpretation and on the dominance of the pleasure principle as the regulating mechanism of psychic life. The text, in other words, “pretends” (TS, 302)—Derrida’s word—to do away with the pleasure principle, to distance the pleasure principle, but then actually works to return it to its rightful place, by means of an interpretation in which the game is, in the final analysis, “entirely handed over to the authority of the PP” (TS, 317). Hence the “formal” thrust of Derrida’s reading: Freud, at the level of the writing, plays *fort/da* with everything that would threaten the dominance of the pleasure principle and ruin the “completeness” and the meaning of the account given of it. The structure of the writing is, in Derrida’s words, one of “abyssal ‘overlapping’”: the interlacing of “the object or content of *Beyond...*, of what Freud is supposedly writing, describing,

analyzing, questioning, treating, etc., and, on the other hand, the system of his writing gestures, the scene of writing that he is playing or that plays itself” (TS, 320). The relation specified here between, on the one hand, the content of the account, and, on the other, its writing is, precisely, a relation of repetition—the writing *repeats* the content.

But crucially, it can be demonstrated, Derrida argues, that the two sides of this repetitive structure do not complete each other in the sense of the “complete game” of *fort/da* referred to by Freud; instead, they intertwine in the form of a “double *fort/da*” (TS, 303). The repetition of the *fort/da* here opens onto an abyss: what is at stake in this “double *fort/da*” is not a simple overlapping in which something original is supplemented by the addition of a secondary impression, but an “abyssal overlapping” in which what is “original” in this relation is put into question.

Repetition, in this instance, unleashes a general destabilization of the relation between the writing and its content or object. If the structure of the account is thus said to be *abyssal*, this is first of all because the “content” that the writing repeats—enacts or performs—does not precede the repetition at the level of the writing; it determines this repetition in advance: “It is not additive but an internal determination, the object of an analytic predication” (TS, 301). But this is also because the content the writing repeats is not an “object “ like any other; it is repetition itself, ceaseless, repeated repetition, which only “achieves” a semblance of completion insofar as it continues to recur.

Freud does with (without) the object of his text exactly what Ernst does with (without) his spool. And if the game is called complete on one side and the other, we have to envisage an eminently symbolic completion which itself would be formed by these two completions, and which therefore would be incomplete in each of its pieces, and consequently would be completely incomplete when the two incompletions, related and joined the one to the other, start to multiply themselves, supplementing each other without completing each other. (TS, 320)

The integrity of the account of the *fort/da*, then, is precisely put into question, undermined from within—rather than secured—by the very procedure of repeating the consoling game of *fort/da*. It is rendered unstable, that is, by repeating what it relates, which is “itself” repetition without end.¹⁵

For Derrida, however, the abyssal structure of repetition is not confined to the scene of the *fort/da*, but is in fact repeated in everything that follows it—and this is what I am trying to track here. The abyssal structure of repeated repetition, on this reading, disperses itself across the text and comes to be installed within the very formulation of the death drive:

The notion of the repetition “*en abyme*” of Freud’s writing has a relation of structural *mimesis* with the relation between the PP and “its” death drive. The latter, once again, is not opposed to the former, but hollows it out with a testamentary writing “*en abyme*” originally, at the origin of the origin. (TS, 304)

Initially, then, we could say that the abyssal repetition of Freud’s account of the *fort/da*—whereby what is related is repeated at the level of its writing—*defines, or institutes*, in advance the structure of the relation of the death drive to the pleasure

¹⁵ In Derrida’s terms, “The story that is related, however, seems to put into ‘*abyme*’ the writing of the relation... Therefore the related is related to the relating. The site of the legible, like the origin of writing, is carried away with itself” (TS, 304).

principle. Or conversely, that the relation between the pleasure principle and the death drive mirrors, mimetically repeats, reiterates the abyssal structure of Freud's "writing." But then what is repeated in this process of mirroring—what the notion of repetition *en abyme* bespeaks—is in actuality the "structure" of an originary hollowing out, according to which the PP will be, at its very origin, *already* incomplete, undermined from within. By a death drive, older than the PP, which is "*developed within* the logic of the repetition compulsion" (TS, 362, my emphasis).

For Derrida, then, the name Freud gives the structure of the death drive and the beyond of the pleasure principle in *Beyond* is the "repetition compulsion"—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that, for Derrida, the structure of the relation between the pleasure principle and the death drive is announced, in advance, in the hypothesis of the repetition compulsion. The *effect* of such a structure is legible, on Derrida's reading, in what he calls the "indecision" of the notion of a compulsion to repeat: the indecision of the *hypothesis* of the compulsion to repeat as well as its *function*, which Freud will approach in terms of the problematic of binding and unbinding. To summarize briefly, in Chapter 3, Freud admits the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat which carries with it no promise of pleasure, "a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle"; but he is quick to emphasize that this compulsion can nevertheless collaborate with the pleasure principle, such that the two "seem to converge here into an intimate partnership" (SE 18: 23). Hence, according to Derrida, the first mode of indecision: sometimes repetition remains under the sway

of the pleasure principle, and sometimes, in a manner that remains obscure, it overrides it.

In an effort to define the function of such a compulsion, however, Freud turns in Chapter 4 to an investigation of traumatic dreams. In such cases, Freud speculates, the repetition of a trauma evidences a function of the psychic apparatus whose task it is to master an excessive influx of stimuli, in the form of a retrospective working through. The psychic apparatus aims, in this instance, at *binding* certain quantities of excitation in order to prepare it for discharge. And while Freud specifies that what is involved here is a function of the apparatus that does not submit to the pleasure principle, it nevertheless does not contradict it either: it is a question, rather, of a function “independent” of the pleasure principle, and “more primitive” than the pursuit of pleasure (SE 18: 32). The task of mastering stimuli by means of binding, in Freud’s words, “must be accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can even begin” (SE 18: 32).

In Chapter 5, however, Freud complicates the account of the psychic response to trauma, approaching the problem in terms of an excess of *internal* excitation whose source, it is said, is the drives. “The essential characteristic of these processes of internal origin,” Derrida writes (TS, 350), is that they are originally unbound, freely circulating; they are associated with what Freud refers to as the “primary processes.” As Freud presents it here, the pleasure principle can affirm its dominance only on the

condition of binding the primary processes. And yet, Freud indicates, this mechanism of binding is already at work prior to the pleasure principle: the task of mastering or binding excitation, Freud writes, “would have precedence—not, indeed, in *opposition* to the pleasure principle, but independently of it and to some extent in disregard of it” (SE 18: 35). On Derrida’s reading, then, a certain indecision emerges with this notion of a binding mechanism operating “in disregard of” the pleasure principle, and this indecision runs the risk of undermining, “confus[ing] the limit of all the concepts involved here” (TS, 351):

This obscurity, which Freud does not insist upon, is due to the fact before the instituted mastery of the PP there is *already* a tendency to binding, a mastering or structuring impulse that foreshadows the PP without being confused with it. It collaborates with the PP without being confused with it. A median, *differing or indifferent* zone (and it is differing only by being indifferent to the oppositional or distinctive difference of the two borders), relates the primary process in its “purity” (a “myth” says the *Traumdeutung*) to the “pure” secondary process entirely subject to the PP. (TS, 351)

The indecision thus installed in this notion of binding inhabits the “object” at stake at this point in *Beyond*, which is, Derrida insists, repetition *itself*, the repetition compulsion understood as, in Freud’s words, the “perpetual recurrence of the same thing” (SE 18: 22).

For Derrida, this indecision at work in the notion of binding in actuality bespeaks the indecision “proper to” the concept of repetition invoked in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and which threatens its work at every step: what Derrida refers to as “the constitutive duplicity of all repetition” (TS, 352). What Freud’s text traces with the notion of binding, that is, is that “there is never repetition *itself*” (TS, 351), which is

to say, never a single, unified, self-present concept of repetition. The indecision of a tendency to bind prior to the pleasure principle figures the duplicity of the concept of repetition in general. On the one hand, there is the classical concept of repetition as that which “repeats something that precedes it, repetition comes after...repetition succeeds a first thing, an original, a primary, a prior, the repeated itself which in and of itself is supposed to be foreign to what is repetitive or repeating in repetition” (TS, 351). On this view, repetition entails a rigorous distinction between what is repeated—an original, a primary—and the process of repeating; and the process of repetition is, accordingly, conceived as “secondary and derivative” (TS, 351). And on the other hand, there is an altogether *other* “*logic*” of repetition:

But sometimes, according to a logic that is other, and non-classical, repetition is “original,” and induces, through and unlimited propagation of itself, a general deconstruction: not only of the entire classical ontology of repetition, along with all the distinctions recalled a moment ago, but also of the entire psychic construction, of everything supporting the drives and their representatives, insuring the integrity of the organization or the corpus (be it psychic or otherwise) under the dominance of the PP... Sometimes, consequently, repetition collaborates with the PP’s mastery, and sometimes, older than the PP, and even permitting itself to be repeated by the PP, the repetition haunts the PP, undermining it, threatening it, persecuting it by seeking an unbound pleasure which resembles, as one vesicle resembles another, an unpleasure chosen for its very atrocity. (TS, 351–352)

But crucially, it is not a matter of choosing one logic of repetition over another insofar as it is precisely the overlapping of the two which is implied in the duplicity of repetition in general, and implied as that which actually constitutes it. That is, the duplicity of repetition implies *both* the recurrence of the same *and* the recurrence of a difference, and the repetitive process only *begins* with this difference.

For Derrida, it is precisely this *other* “logic” of repetition—the unanalyzed remainder at work in the text—which disturbs Freud’s various attempts to think the beyond of the pleasure principle in terms of repetition, and which it fails, repeatedly, to resolve. But in attempting to negotiate the possibility of this “other logic,” the *double* logic of repetition¹⁶—the so-called “constitutive duplicity”—comes to be installed within the text as the very structure of the relation between the repetition compulsion and the pleasure principle: the structure whereby, “sometimes...repetition collaborates with the PP’s mastery,” and “sometimes, older than the PP, repetition haunts the PP, undermining it, threatening it.” The compulsion to repeat, accordingly, can never be strictly *opposed* to the pleasure principle for Derrida; it seems, rather, to take it over, or “override” it, from within, deflecting it from its original course and proper function. Inhabiting it as that which is, in Freud’s terms, “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual” (SE 18: 23) than the pursuit of pleasure.

The Death Drive

What Derrida’s reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* thereby makes legible, then, is a kind of collusion between psychoanalysis and deconstruction in challenging the “classical ontology” of repetition. Derrida locates in Freud’s text a logic of repetition that Freud himself does not think through explicitly, as the theme or object of his writing. But this proximity is, I have said, *problematic*, and this is, I think, because “To Speculate” also gives indications of Derrida’s resistance to Freud.

¹⁶ Derrida calls it “the differential stricture of repetition” (TS, 353).

Derrida seems to resist Freud, in short, in certain key moments in his reading of the final chapters of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Derrida seems to want to read in Freud a turning back on the “non-classical” logic of life and death that the notion of the death drive actually suggests. Yet there is an ambivalence operative in Freud’s text, I want to suggest, that Derrida’s reading does not quite do justice to: what I read as a persistent ambivalence in Freud’s text around the relation between the pleasure principle and its “beyond,” a kind of irreducible complication inhabiting Freud’s writing on the relation between the death drive and the life drives.¹⁷

But, following Bennington here, I am not attempting simply to indicate the manner in which Freud as I read him is “actually” a Derridean, the manner in which Freudian psychoanalysis is, in actuality, a form of deconstruction prior to deconstruction. The mode of belonging to metaphysics that Derrida critiques, and the resistance to metaphysics deconstruction is said to enact, are neither simple nor complete: Freud, like Derrida, has no other choice than to draw upon a “classical” logic of repetition even as he theorizes its limits. The point, then, is to try to remain attentive to a series of specific tensions, in order to be able to, in Bennington’s words, “pick up...the trace of a singular, original, nervous relation between psychoanalysis and deconstruction” (ID, 107). For Bennington, if there is a “singular” relation between psychoanalysis

¹⁷ I draw here, again, on Teresa de Lauretis’ reading of the ambivalences in Freud’s writing. See de Lauretis, *Freud’s Drive*, 85.

and deconstruction, it is, as he puts it, “for *non-contingent* reasons” (ID, 94 my emphasis)—that is, for reasons that are irreducible.¹⁸

On my reading, there is a certain ambiguity present in Freud’s thinking on the relation between life and death in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that continually puts to into question the “sharp distinction” (SE 18: 44) Freud tries to draw between the death drive and the life drives. Within the text of *Beyond*, the death drive seems not so much opposed to the pleasure principle as much as something that inhabits it, and overrides it, from within. In fact, this is precisely what Derrida’s reading of *Beyond* seeks to bring out: the “impossible logic” of the death drive, whereby death is not opposed to life, but must be seen as internal to it. What Derrida seeks to bring out in Freud is, in part, this very logic whereby the relation between life and death is refigured as “life death” (TS, 285). But Derrida also tracks how Freud steps back from this thought at crucial points in the text, and once Derrida makes this move, he seems to want to restrict a persistent ambiguity in Freud.

In the text of *Beyond*, the precise relation between the order of life and death is, I think, fundamentally complicated. If the repetition compulsion suggests to Freud the

¹⁸ An understanding of the manner in which psychoanalysis inhabits metaphysics without being “exhausted” by it—and thus, in turn, an understanding of the manner in which deconstruction inhabits psychoanalysis even as it is *not* psychoanalysis—is absolutely crucial for Derrida, Bennington argues. It is the very thing that makes possible deconstruction’s understanding of its *own* complicated relation to metaphysics, the manner in which it resists metaphysics even as it inhabits it; which is precisely what defines deconstruction. To put it another way, the complex form of psychoanalysis’s relation to metaphysics, and thus the complex form of the deconstruction’s relation to psychoanalysis, is irreducible because it is actually “constitutive of the thought of deconstruction as such” (ID, 100).

possibility of a drive beyond the pleasure principle, I have said, it is first of all because it seems to Freud to “exhibit to a high degree an instinctual character”: it does not obey the laws of the secondary process, but rather, seems to belong solely to the primary process, to the unconscious. Such a tendency seems to Freud to be driven by “some ‘daemonic’ power” that contradicts the pleasure principle (SE 18: 35). This leads Freud, ultimately, to posit that there must be two groups of drives: on the one hand, a “death drive” that seeks a kind of absolute absence of excitation beyond the state of equilibrium sought by the pleasure principle, and on the other, the “life drives,” which seek to prolong life by binding and holding organic “substance” together.

There thus seem to be two groups of drives working against one another, militating against one another, for Freud, “from the very first” (SE 18: 61). But the *regressive* character of the compulsion to repeat—the repetition of “purely infantile” material or the repeated return to a past trauma (SE 18: 36)—Freud observed in traumatic dreams and in the analytic treatment also leads Freud, prior to naming Eros or the life drives, to rethink what a drive in general is: “*It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces...*” (SE 18: 36). Life, here, now consists in a prolonged path back to a prior state: “an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads” (SE 18:

38). What life tends toward, then, Freud speculates, can only be an original, inanimate state of quiescence, the state of quiescence that preceded it. The origin and aim of all life, then, he suggests, is death.

Consequently, on this, what Freud in a footnote added in 1925 calls the most “extreme,” most speculative line of thinking (SE 18: 37), the self-preservative drives that Freud sees at work in the living organism, “the guardians of life,” would now have to be understood to function in actuality as “myrmidons of death,” the satellites of death, ensuring the organism follows only “its own path to death, [warding] off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself” (SE 18: 39). The self-preservative drives that initially appeared to safeguard life from death now appear solely to make certain that the organism reaches death “only in its own fashion” (SE 18: 39). Life and death, here, I simply want to underscore, are no longer simply opposed. If life actually consists in the prolonged detour on the road to death at this moment in Freud’s text, then *death is immanent to life*. Death inhabits life, as what is in fact “most proper” to it. Freud is not unaware of what is startling about this, as Teresa de Lauretis has noted (FD, 76). If the self-preservative drives ultimately serve the death drive, Freud concludes, we are left with the “paradoxical” image of the living organism struggling vigorously against mortal threats that would end its life prematurely, in order to pursue its own path to death. Nevertheless, Freud writes, “such behavior

is...precisely what characterizes purely instinctual as contrasted with intelligent efforts” (SE 18: 39).

Derrida, for his part, is highly attentive to the paradoxical relation between life and death traced here. It is, for Derrida, precisely what Freud’s text ultimately “gives to be thought,” offers without entirely reflecting on, and which Derrida repeats after him, with the quasi-concept of “*life death*”:

If death is not opposable it is, already, *life death*. This Freud does not say, does not say it presently, here, nor even elsewhere in this form. It gives (itself to be) thought without ever being given or thought. (TS, 285)

In fact, when Derrida begins to speak of “*life death*” here, he is returning to and fleshing out something he is trying to think already in “Freud and the Scene of Writing.” There, recall, when Derrida set out to track the metaphors of writing in Freud’s work, he would uncover in Freud a thinking of the memory trace, of time, and—crucially—of life and death that can only uneasily be contained within the metaphysical tradition. Something is glimpsed in Freud’s thinking, on this view, even if, as Derrida then goes on to show, Freud ultimately disavows what these metaphors suggest; namely, that death, and the lifeless writing machine, are actually inherent in the order of life within the psyche, and cannot be simply excluded from it.

But we ought to pay particular attention to Derrida’s reading of Freud’s early “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1895). Because what Derrida finds in Freud’s model of the psyche there is the notion that psychic life is bound up with death. Indeed, the

function of the memory trace in the psyche, Freud suggests in this text, is to retain the memory of an experience of satisfaction, to thus to provide for a general lowering of excitation in the apparatus. In this way, Derrida writes, what Freud describes is “the effort of life to protect itself by *deferring* a dangerous cathexis, that is, by constituting a reserve (*Vorrat*). The threatening expenditure or presence are deferred with the help of breaching or repetition” (FSW, 202). But the implications of this are radical, for as Derrida puts it, “Is [this] not already death at the origin of a life which can defend itself against death only through an *economy* of death, through deferment, repetition, reserve?” (FSW, 202). This economy of death, however, Derrida makes clear, is actually present in life at the very outset, is essential to the very possibility of life. Thus we find Derrida, already in “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” speaking of something like “*life death*”:

No doubt life protects itself by repetition, trace, *différance* (deferral). But we must be wary of this formulation: there is no life present *at first* which would *then* come to protect, postpone, or reserve itself in *différance*. The latter constitutes the essence of life.... This is the only condition on which we can say that life *is* death, that repetition and the beyond of the pleasure principle are native and congenital to that which they transgress. When Freud writes in the *Project* that “facilitations serve the primary function,” he is forbidding us to be surprised by *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. (FSW, 203)

And yet, if it is already traced in “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in “To Speculate,” Derrida goes further. As I have indicated, in “To Speculate,” Derrida suggests that what is ultimately at stake in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is precisely this logic of “*life death*.”

But if this is what Freud's text ultimately offers to be thought, Derrida's reading of *Beyond* underscores at this point the manner in which the text works simultaneously to *reappropriate* to an oppositional logic what is glimpsed in this "speculative" moment. Derrida picks up on the insistence in Freud's writing, beyond simply what transpires at the level of the theoretical elaboration he is pursuing, on the necessity of "guarding" life and "guarding" death (TS, 361) invoked in the self-preservative drives said to be the "satellites" or "guardians" of death. "*One must [il faut]: guard death or guard life,*" Derrida writes: "Such is the syntax of this vigilance in truth" (TS, 361). Hence, for Derrida, the manner in which Freud moves almost immediately to undo the ambiguity in his account, whereby sexuality is invoked as the emblem of an opposing force Freud is about to call Eros or the life drives:

One group of drives rushes forward in order to reach the final aim of life as quickly as possible. But, division of labor, another group comes back to the start of the same path in order to go over the route and "so prolong the journey" [Freud's words]. Between the two groups, on the same map, a network coordinates, more or less well, more or less regularly, communications, transports, "locals" and "expresses," switch points, relays, and correspondences... But the unity of the map is always problematic, as is even the unity of the code within the computer. (TS, 361–362)

A strict dualism of the drives is undermined, then, for Derrida, even as Eros emerges at the close of Chapter 5 in the form of "the true life instincts" (SE 18: 48–9), an elemental force opposed to the death drive.

But there are indications in the text, I want to suggest, that Freud cannot simply turn away from or do away with this complication, insofar as in the final chapter of *Beyond* he returns to and retraces this line of thinking. In Chapter 7, all that remains

for Freud to account for is, ostensibly, the precise relation between repetition and the pleasure principle. That is, having arrived at the hypothesis of two groups of drives “struggling with each other from the very first” (SE 18: 61), the life drive and the death drive, Freud returns to one of the questions that he seems to have left unresolved, namely the question of whether there might be a form of drive repetition that is “independent” of the pleasure principle but not actually opposed to it.

This is where Derrida’s attention comes to be focused in his reading of the chapter. Derrida explores the paradoxes that seem to emerge from the notion of a binding mechanism prior to the pleasure principle: the total dominance of the PP has to actually be “prepared” (TS, 395) by something else, and what’s more, as Freud then seems to acknowledge in the text, “it is by limiting the possible intensity of pleasure or unpleasure that the PP conquers its mastery” (TS, 400). Thus in a certain sense, Derrida writes, “the pleasure *principle* makes war on pleasure” (TS, 399), so that by the end of *Beyond* we no longer really know what pleasure is.

But then, oddly, Derrida seems to have less to say about the other key moment in this chapter. Because if Freud is working out a notion of binding in this final chapter, he seems to me also to be still wrestling with the problematic relation between the two groups of drives he has posited. Indicating some of the starting points for future investigations, Freud remarks on what seems most readily to differentiate the two groups of drives: the life drives are able make themselves known to us—they impinge

on the psychic apparatus and make themselves perceptible in this way—but the death drives seem to do its work in silence. Three years later this is how Freud would put it, how he would describe the fact that the death drive has no psychological representatives, but here he simply says that “the death instincts seem to do their work unobtrusively” (SE 18: 63). What’s more, Freud writes, “*the pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts*” (SE 18: 63, my emphasis). The pleasure principle works to ensure the discharge of external excitation, he notes, but it is even “more especially on guard against increases of stimulation from within, which would make the task of living more difficult” (SE 18: 63). What the pleasure principle works against, then, is an excess of life that would get in the way of the path towards death. In pursuing the reduction of excitation, the pleasure principle, it seems, works *on behalf* of the tendency towards the absolute dissolution of tension. The death drive, then, inhabits the pleasure principle, in its very functioning; death inhabits life, “from the very first.”

In the course of his reading of Freud up to this point, Derrida traces the workings of this precise logic in *Beyond* (the logic of “life death”). I would even say it is difficult to think this logic without Derrida, without the reading of Freud he elaborates. Indeed, what the “constitutive duplicity” of repetition means—what “*sometimes* repetition collaborates with the PP and *sometimes* it undermines the PP” means—for a metapsychology of the drives is that “there is no more opposition,” in the end, between pleasure and unpleasure, life and death, the *beyond* of the PP and what is

within the PP; that “There is only pleasure which itself limits itself, only pain which itself limits itself...” (TS, 401). The “irresolution” of this logic, for Derrida, ultimately comes to be installed within “the thing itself” at stake in Freud’s text—the pleasure or unpleasure principle, which can no longer be understood as a self-standing thing in-itself. But all of this is “thought without being thought” for Derrida. Yet at this moment in *Beyond*, I am suggesting—in this remark which, again, Derrida says very little about—we see Freud still grappling, explicitly, ambivalently, with a notion of death internal to life, even as it puts into question the strict dualism of the drives.

As Freud seems to acknowledge here, the immanence of death to life complicates any simple opposition between the life drives and the death drives. As a consequence, Freud’s approach to what lies “beyond the pleasure principle” itself entails a certain irreducible complication. And this is, on my reading, part of what Freud begins to register and think through in his well-known discussion of the “figurative language” (*Bildersprache*) of psychoanalysis found at the close of Chapter 6. Having advanced the hypothesis that there may be a drive whose origin is the need to restore an earlier state of things, Freud appends “a few words of critical reflection” (SE 18: 59). With the notion of the death drive, Freud writes, the third step in the theory of the instincts “cannot lay claim to the same degree of certainty as the two earlier ones” (SE 18: 59). The reason that the speculative third step in the theory of the drives will not have the certainty of the previous two is that the notion of the regressive character of the drives

cannot be pursued without “diverging widely from empirical observation” (SE 18: 59). Nevertheless, he writes, this uncertainty should not bother us greatly, because it is unavoidable.

It is unavoidable, Freud insists, on account of psychoanalysis’s reliance on what he calls “figurative language”:

We need not feel greatly disturbed in judging our speculation upon the life and death instincts by the fact that so many bewildering and obscure processes occur in it—such as one instinct being driven out by another or an instinct turning from the ego to an object, and so on. This is merely due to our being obliged to operate with the scientific terms, that is to say with the figurative language, peculiar to psychology (or, more precisely, to depth psychology). We could not otherwise describe the processes in question at all, and indeed we could not have become aware of them. (SE 18: 60)

What is described here, then, is not simply a problem of description: that is, a difficulty in rendering empirically observable processes of drive repetition into words, into the “peculiar language” of psychoanalysis. As Derrida himself notes, Freud is not speaking merely of the “primacy of intuition, of observation, of perception” (TS, 382) prior to any attempt to transcribe or describe it in metapsychological terms. Rather, the difficulty Freud is attempting to specify here is more profound. The difficulty is due, at bottom, to the fact that, in Freud’s words, with regard to the specific “processes in question... *we could not have become aware of them*” otherwise than with, or within, figurative language. To put it more simply, these processes would not even be *perceptible* as such, Freud suggests, outside of the recourse to figurative language. Which is to say, it cannot be grasped *itself*—“in person”—beyond the form of its inscription. In this way, Derrida writes, Freud

“situate[s] discourse at the very heart of perception, from its first step, and as its condition” (TS, 383). The obscurities introduced by a form of figuration “would not be after the fact in relation to a perceptive or intuitive origin, they would inhabit this origin on its very threshold” (TS, 383). What is traced here, then, it would seem, is in fact a “non-classical” notion of figuration: the difficulty in adequately describing what is observed or perceived is due to the fact that it is originally mediated. For Derrida, however, the logic of a complication at the “first step” is ultimately circumscribed, insofar as Freud seems to profess an unwavering faith in the potential for the biological sciences to shed new light on what remains obscure.

But what Freud is registering here, I want to suggest, is something like the irreducible complication at the heart of all speculation on the beyond of the pleasure principle, “upon the life and death instincts.” Reading Freud this way, what speculation encounters, ultimately, is the impossibility of adequately perceiving the originary beyond of the pleasure principle. Or more precisely, it encounters the impossibility of a pure origin uninfected by the complications introduced by figurative language—in other words, it encounters an originary complication; in other words, it encounters what Bennington calls “an originary non-originary” (ID, 106). The failure of the discourse to be adequate to what it would describe is not a provisional difficulty to be overcome but an irreducible feature—an inadequacy or failure that seems bound up, in this passage, with the paradoxical relation between life and death traced in *Beyond*. And it is hard not to read Freud here as beginning to reflect on this problem, despite

what Derrida would seem to suggest. Thus if there is something problematic inhabiting the relation between Derrida and Freud, it is, at least in part, Derrida's resistance to psychoanalysis. A certain resistance to psychoanalysis that complicates Derrida's relation to Freud in *The Post Card* and beyond.

Chapter 2:

The Death Drive and “Repetitive Insistence”: Derrida and Lacan

Derrida’s dealings with psychoanalysis were not limited to Freud. In *The Post Card*, Derrida’s engagement with psychoanalytic texts extends to another influential reading of Freud: that of Lacan. Derrida elaborates the deconstructive critique of Lacan in “The Purveyor of Truth”¹—a text devoted to a close reading of Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” which itself attempts to take up the question of repetition in Freud—but it is underway even before *The Post Card*. In 1972, just five years after the appearance of the *Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*, an interview with Derrida was published in which he was asked about his position on Lacan, on what kind of relationship there might be between his own thinking on the problematic of writing and Lacan’s notion of the “signifier” and “the symbolic.” Already at this early moment, Derrida’s answer is clear: even if Lacan’s project is undoubtedly crucial to the field of psychoanalysis after Freud, it remains, Derrida said, firmly located within the tradition of metaphysics those works from 1967 set out to analyze and disrupt.²

¹ Jacques Derrida, “*Le facteur de la vérité*,” in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

² Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 108.

Yet Derrida's engagement with Lacan does not end with *The Post Card*. Derrida returns to this initial reading of Lacan repeatedly, in "*Mes chances*" (a lecture delivered in 1982, first published in 1988) and then again much later in two texts found in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* (both dating from 1990).³ Derrida's treatment of Lacan took a different form than did his readings of Freud, however. Derrida's readings of Freud were aimed, I have suggested, at showing how Freud's articulation of psychoanalytic concepts is undermined by a certain "non-classical" logic that it does not explicitly theorize. For instance, as I showed in Chapter 1, Derrida's reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* traces how the speculative project is persistently and repeatedly disrupted, or "detoured," by a logic of repetition Freud does not thematize or think through, but which actually accounts for the manner in which *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* continually fails to make any progress on what lies beyond the pleasure principle. In his dealings with Lacan, by contrast, Derrida attempts to demonstrate how Lacan's explicit attempt to formulate a *nonmetaphysical* conception of the subject—one that puts into question the notion of a self-identical subject—in fact, despite appearances, does not really break with metaphysics. In broad terms, Derrida attempts to show that Lacan's linguistically oriented "return to Freud" remains beholden to metaphysics, or at least has a certain "unthought

³ I discuss one of the latter at length in Chapter 3. See Jacques Derrida, "My Chances/*Mes chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophanies," trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronnell, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Vol. 1*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 344–376. See also Jacques Derrida, "Resistances" and "For the Love of Lacan," in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

solidarity” or complicity with the metaphysical tradition as Geoffrey Bennington puts it.⁴

From the mid-70s on, into the texts from *Resistances* of the early 90s, this critique comes to define Derrida’s relationship to Lacan. He returns to the terms of the debate consistently and repeatedly.⁵ But there is something problematic about Derrida’s relationship to Lacan, I will argue. In Chapter 1, I tried to analyze Derrida’s resistance to Freud, and there is, I think, is something like a resistance to Lacan at work in Derrida’s writing as well, even if it evidences itself in a different way than Derrida’s resistance to Freud does. But again, just as before, as I hope to show, the death drive will be at the center of things in this instance as well. Because if Lacan’s discourse remains beholden to metaphysics, it *also* militates against metaphysics, and in particular, I would say, in how Lacan theorizes the death drive. Derrida ultimately comes quite close to saying this in *Resistances*, somewhat belatedly. In “For the Love of Lacan,” in which Derrida reflects on his fraught relationship with Lacan, he will say that “the discourse that was at the same time the closest and the most

⁴ Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), 96.

⁵ From “The Purveyor of Truth” on, Derrida seems to me reluctant to say of Lacan what he consistently and quite explicitly says of Freud, namely, that his discourse was always *divided*: it necessarily inherits its concepts from the metaphysical tradition, but in certain key respects it also militates against it, even if this is not something that Freud reflects on. This will be Derrida’s constant theme in his writings on Freud, from “Freud and the Scene of Writing” right up to his last words on Freud in an address to the Estates General of Psychoanalysis in 2000 (I discuss this last text in Chapter 4). But Derrida will never quite say this about Lacan, “so much more a philosopher than Freud.” Jacques Derrida, “For the Love of Lacan,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 47.

deconstructible, the one that was most to be deconstructed, was no doubt Lacan's."⁶ But Derrida does not pursue this any further, and does not pursue the connection he himself points to earlier in that same text, namely that for him, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* "is not just any book by Freud and, as you know, not just any book by Freud for Lacan..." (FLL, 41). Thus, I am arguing, there is a kind of proximity between Derrida and Lacan that Derrida himself never really took account of, and this proximity has to do, above all, with how Derrida and Lacan rethink the death drive. Already in Seminar II—that is, the Seminar on which the crucial "The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" of the *Écrits* is based—Lacan is rethinking the death drive in a way that puts a metaphysical conception of the subject into question. To be clear, my interest here is not in simply defending Lacan in the face of Derrida's critique, and thus in a decision in a debate which is not as simple as it might appear.⁷ Rather, I am trying to bring out a certain proximity between Derrida and Lacan in the way these theorists rethink what Freud calls the death drive.

The Indivisibility of the Letter

I would like to begin by sketching out what is at stake in Derrida's critique of the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in "The Purveyor of Truth," as a way of carving

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "For the Love of Lacan," in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 55. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁷ What is at stake in the debate itself has been consistently misunderstood, in my view. For a recent example, see Adrian Johnston's *Zizek's Ontology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 88–89. While Martin Hägglund and David Wills have gone a bit further than others in taking account of the complexity of the debate, problems still remain with both accounts. See Martin Hägglund, "Chronolibidinal Reading: Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis," *The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009): 32; and David Wills, *Matchbook: Essays in Deconstruction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 45–48.

out a path in this difficult terrain. In order to understand Derrida's analysis of the Seminar, we need an understanding of what Lacan is trying to do in this text. In schematic terms, Lacan outlines in the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" a notion of the repetition compulsion as a function or effect of "the signifier." That is, as an effect of language, where language is understood as a system that produces meaning through articulation, by means of the differential relation between units, and not by standing in for and pointing to an ideal meaning that precedes language and is untouched by it.⁸ The notion that repetition is an effect of the operations of the signifier in the subject is, for Lacan, emblematic of what is most revolutionary about Freud's discovery of the unconscious, because it points clearly to a radical rethinking of the subject as "de-centered" in relation to a discursive structure that it is not under its control and which operates outside of conscious intentionality. Derrida, however, attempts to show that in this very demonstration, Lacan's conception of "the subject of the signifier" reveals itself to be *centered* in relation to something that, admittedly, is not under its control and operates in such a way that it produces only senseless repetition, but whose contours nevertheless appear to be more or less stable and determinable. Derrida's readers, however, seem to have missed this even though it is the crux of his argument. I will have occasion to comment on these readings of Derrida in what follows.

⁸ Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud*, trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27.

In the text of the Seminar in the *Écrits*, I should note, it might seem that for Lacan the terms “signifier” and “letter” are interchangeable, but a subtle distinction is drawn between the two terms: as Derrida picks up on and repeats consistently whenever he discusses the debate with Lacan, the letter designates *the place* of the signifier, its necessary localization and materialization (FV, 440).⁹ For Lacan, the term “signifier” invokes the process of articulation through which meaning is produced belatedly, as it were, out of the relation between units within the signifying system—a process which Lacan will locate at the very core of language. Hence, the term “signifier” can often stand in for, in Lacan’s discourse, the operations of language in general. But if this is the case, this process must necessarily (if there is spoken or written language at all) be materialized and localized in some way; it must take some sort of phonematic or graphic form. What Lacan calls “the letter” is this very form, the place of the signifier, even if the signifying process referred to by this latter term in some sense is never entirely reducible to this place. The signifier, in this way, always overflows its locality: if it is the product of the relation between the units in the system, it will always be difficult to pin down, it will always in some way be elsewhere than in the letter that instantiates it.¹⁰

⁹ See also Derrida, “For the Love of Lacan,” 60.

¹⁰ Samuel Weber puts it this way: “Lacan insists on the distinction between signifier and letter; the significance of this distinction, however, lies not so much in neatly separating otherwise clear concepts, as in designating the ineluctability of difference, insofar as it coincides with the movement of articulation. The signifiers materialized and localized in the letter, which should not be identified with the signifier, since the latter, strictly speaking, has no identity, but instead designates the process through which identity is produced in the first place.” Weber, *Return to Freud*, 63–64.

Already, we might begin to see why Lacan will say the place occupied by the letter is “odd”—in the form of the letter, the signifier is both in a given place and at the same time “lacking from its place.” Thus, as Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s close reading of the essay on “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious” allows us to see, the letter actually “gathers together the essential features of the signifier in the form of typographical characters.”¹¹ That is, the letter, by invoking a typographical letter, stands in for what Lacan calls the signifier, but it does so by designating a particular set of features which “structurally constitutes the signifier.”¹² These features, which will be at the center of Derrida’s remarks on Lacan, are both its indivisibility—the typographical letter cannot be broken down into smaller sub-units without destroying it—which sometimes appears to extend to a kind of indestructibility in Lacan’s thinking, and its “odd” manner of both being in and out of place at the same time.

In the Seminar, then, Lacan draws on Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter” as a didactic example of the claim that the repetition compulsion has its roots in the signifying chain. In Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” a private letter addressed to the Queen, whose contents are never revealed (the reader is told only that its contents must remain a secret to the King), is stolen from the royal *boudoir* by one of her Ministers, and the investigator Dupin is contracted by the Prefect of Police to locate it

¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 51.

¹² Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 61.

and return it to its original addressee. What interests Lacan is the manner in which the circulation of the letter—its path, as it passes from one person’s possession to the next—determines the actions of the various characters. As Lacan reads “The Purloined Letter,” two scenes repeat each other: the first, the scene of the Minister’s surreptitious removal of the letter in front of the Queen in the royal apartment; the second, the scene of the letter’s theft by Dupin in the Minister’s quarters. As Shoshana Felman has emphasized, it is not the repetition of a given action that Lacan focuses on here.¹³ Rather, it is the repetition, across the two scenes, of the process whereby the various participants are positioned within a particular intersubjective structure, their place being determined strictly in relation to the purloined letter of the title. In this repetition, however, a difference is introduced. In the second scene, the positions are displaced and altered as an effect of the changing position of the letter.¹⁴

Thus, as Lacan makes quite clear from the outset of the “Seminar,” the short story can be read as an illustration of the fact that, as Lacan rereads Freud, it is the functioning of the signifier that determines the subject in his or her actions; of the fact that the subject is constituted and determined by “the itinerary of a signifier.”¹⁵ More specifically, in turning to Poe’s text, Lacan is trying to demonstrate to an audience of analysts that what Freud terms the repetition automatism—the standard rendering in

¹³ Shoshana Felman, “On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytical Approaches,” in *The Purloined Poe*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 145–146.

¹⁴ Felman, “On Reading Poetry,” 145.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

French of Freud's *Wiederholungszwang*—has its basis in a particular feature of the signifier, “in what I have called the *insistence* of the signifying chain” (E, 6). I will have more to say about this notion of insistence below, but for now I would like to focus on what Lacan refers to as the itinerary of the signifier. Crucially, Lacan defines the itinerary of the signifier as the movement of a *displacement*, and it is this displacement which is at the heart of what Freud called the compulsion to repeat.

If what Freud discovered, and rediscovers ever more abruptly, has a meaning, it is that the signifier's displacement determines subjects' acts, destiny, refusals, blindness, success, and fate, regardless of their innate gifts and instruction, and irregardless of their character or sex; and that everything pertaining to the psychological pre-given follows willy-nilly the signifier's train, like weapons and baggage. (E, 21)

Thus, it is the mechanism of this displacement—at the level of the subject of the unconscious in relation to the ego, as much as at the level of the narrative of Poe's text—that is the subject of the Seminar; that is, the precise manner in which the displacement manifest as repetitive insistence “is determined by the place” of a “pure signifier” (E, 10). If for Lacan the Poe illustrates “the supremacy of the *signifier* in the subject” (E, 14, my emphasis)—and not of the signified—it is primarily because, in Barbara Johnson's apt phrasing, “the letter does not function as a unit of meaning (a *signified*) but as that which produces certain effects (a *signifier*).”¹⁶

In the Seminar, then, Lacan is quick to point out that the message the purloined letter contains is never actually revealed and is, in some sense, immaterial:

¹⁶ Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida,” in *The Purloined Poe*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 217.

As for the letter's import, we know only the dangers it would bring with it were it to fall into the hands of a certain third party...But this tells us nothing about the message it carries. [...] Love letter or conspiratorial letter, informant's letter or directive, demanding letter or letter of distress, we can rest assured of but one thing: the Queen cannot let her lord and master know of it. (E, 19)

And this is precisely, at bottom, what is said of the letter: it produces effects—e.g. an insistent compulsion to repeat—by functioning autonomously as a *pure signifier* that does not correspond to a given signified, according to a mode of functioning that, as Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe show, for Lacan *has no meaning*.¹⁷ The Seminar is devoted to demonstrating that the signifying chain, the play of pure signifiers, in which the subject is implicated “insists” insofar as it produces discernable effects even if it never achieves *signification*—the articulation of an intelligible meaning. What “the supremacy of the signifier in the subject” means, then, Derrida suggests, is that “The subject is no more master or author of the signifier than meaning is...If there is a subject *of the* signifier, it is in being subject to the law of the signifier” (FV, 422).

On the one hand, for Derrida, one of the problems with the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”—which opens the *Écrits* and therefore, Derrida will argue, serves as an introduction to and distillation of everything that follows it—is that what is has to say about repetition and the subject of the signifier is, in the end, predicated on the claim that Edgar Allan Poe's short story “The Purloined Letter” illustrates Freud's notion of the repetition compulsion; it is constructed on the basis, that is, of a move

¹⁷ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 47.

that effectively *reduces* the literary text, in all its formal complexity, to something that simply relays what psychoanalysis has to tell us, to a mere illustration of psychoanalytic truth.¹⁸ Derrida's claim in "The Purveyor of Truth," then, is that Lacan, in his treatment of Poe's short story, reduces "the scene of writing" (the signifier) to the meaning it supposedly communicates (the signified), even though, at the level of the theoretical demonstration, Lacan wants to say that it is the functioning of the signifier, and not any signified, that "governs the subject in his actions." This is, in large part, what commentators have focused on in dealing with these texts.¹⁹ But to my mind, this issue—while undoubtedly an important one, as Derrida himself underscored in "*Mes Chances*"—is not really at the center of Derrida's critique of Lacan.²⁰

On the other hand, Barbara Johnson has pointed to how Derrida seems to see Lacan, despite what he wants to say, holding onto a metaphysical conception of the

¹⁸ "The 'Seminar's' interest in the agency of the signifier in its letter seizes upon this agency to the extent that it constitutes, precisely, on the first approach, the exemplary content, the meaning, the written of Poe's fiction, as opposed to its writing, its signifier, its narrating form. The displacement of the signifier, therefore, is analyzed as a signified, as the recounted object of a short story" (FV, 427–428).

¹⁹ See Irene Harvey, "Structures of Exemplarity in Poe, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida" in *The Purloined Poe*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 252.

²⁰ See Derrida's "*Mes Chances*," where he makes clear that the bracketing of the literary text is not immaterial to the debate about the whether the functioning of the signifier can be properly determined and isolated: "...let us say that art, in particular the art of discourse and literature, represents only a certain power of indeterminacy that stems from the capacity of isolating *performatively* its own context for its own event, that of the 'oeuvre.' It is perhaps a certain freedom, a large margin in the play of this isolation." Jacques Derrida, "My Chances/*Mes chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophanies," trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronnell, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Vol. 1*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 374.

signifier.²¹ On this view, where Lacan wants to underscore the displacement of stable meaning with the notion of the signifier—defined as it is only by its relation to other signifiers—Derrida tries to show that the signifier in actuality functions in the Lacanian schema as a kind of self-standing identity, insofar as it resists destruction and division. But in thus attributing a univocal meaning to Lacan’s writing on the letter, Johnson suggests, Derrida seems to misread Lacan and unwittingly repeats the gesture “The Purveyor of Truth” sets out to critique; so that, in the end, *both* Lacan and Derrida try to contain the undecidability of “the letter” at times: Lacan in the analysis of Poe’s text, Derrida in the analysis of Lacan’s.

When Derrida accuses Lacan of reducing the signifier to a signified, on this reading, it is not only in the sense of reducing the “scene of writing” of Poe’s text to an illustration of a more general truth, but, more importantly, in the sense that Lacan, no matter what he says about the functioning of the signifier (the “play,” we might say) as that of a *pure* signifier, conceives of the signifier-letter as an inviolable signifying unit (one that determines the subject in its actions), and if this is the case, then what defines the signifier in Lacan is not the differential relation between units within the system, but a self-standing identity. Even if Lacan does not assign the signifier a given meaning, so long as Lacan conceives of the signifier in this way, so the argument goes, the signifier will function as the ultimate, hidden ground of the subject in all of his or her actions. Johnson’s response to Derrida goes a considerable

²¹ See Johnson, “The Frame of Reference,” 217.

way in pointing out some of the crucial issues with Derrida's reading of Lacan, but again, to my mind, I am not convinced that her reading is quite right: the issue here, as I see it, is that Derrida is not saying that Lacan actually thinks that the letter ought to be understood as a self-standing entity. Derrida knows quite well, I think, that for Lacan the letter both is and is not "in its place"—and therefore "resists destruction" insofar as it is both a material unit and an immaterial process of articulation—but that even if this is the case, the displacement of the subject effected by the letter itself has now been posited as a kind of transcendental. In the remainder of this section, I will try to unpack this statement.

Certainly, Lacan's discussion of the letter's itinerary and the questions Derrida raises concerning its divisibility are at the core of the debate. As I have noted, Lacan says explicitly in the Seminar that the path of the letter indicates a kind of displacement, but Derrida will contend that the path of this displacement, or detour, is constructed in such a way in Lacan's presentation that it is effectively circular, and as such, the displacement at issue here is in some sense delimited and determinable. A similar logic is at work, according to Derrida, in how Lacan describes the "odd" materiality of the letter: the "*singular*," or "*odd*," (both of which render the French *singulière*) materiality of the signifier, as Lacan describes it (E, 16). Lacan defines the materiality of the letter in terms of two features: the *indivisibility* of the letter and its *locatability*. On the one hand, the materiality of the signifier is "singular" insofar as it cannot be divided in two: it does not, according to Lacan, "allow of partition" (E,

16). “Cut a letter into pieces,” Lacan continues, “and it remains the letter that it is...” (E, 17). Lacan is playing here with the fact that, in French, one cannot say “some letter,” only “a letter.” On the other hand, the letter is defined in terms of, in Derrida’s words, “a certain *locality*” (FV, 424)—a *certain* locality because the letter “has relations” (E, 16) with location, but this relationship is, again, odd. The letter has a place, but this place is not like that of an object “in the real world.”

For the signifier is a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence. This is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be *and* will not be where it is wherever it goes. (E, 17)

In order to illustrate the locality of the letter, Lacan invokes the purloined letter of the story, which is located, ultimately, precisely where it could not be found. The locality of the letter is the locality of “what is *not in its place* [manque à sa place], as a call slip says of a volume mislaid in a library” (E, 17). As Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe conclude, then, “this localization is always, strangely, a “being-out-of-place” [or a lack of a place] if place designates a location in objective reality.”²² In sum, the locality of the letter is, on Derrida’s reading, strictly “non-empirical and *non-real*” (FV, 424).

For Derrida, then, when taken together these two features of the letter’s materiality, its indivisibility and its locatability, suggest a kind of idealization of the letter as a transcendental entity. “*This ‘materiality,’ deduced from an indivisibility found nowhere, in fact corresponds to an idealization.* Only the ideality of a letter resists

²² Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 28.

destructive division” (FV, 464). This idealization of the letter, Derrida argues, is propped up by Lacan’s tendency to revert to a kind of “phonematism,” a privileging of the spoken and the voice over the written, the inscription of the letter as writing, and the text (FV, 463).²³ While the concept of the letter appears to invoke a typographical letter, in other words, the postulate of the odd “materiality” of the signifier suggests that Lacan actually limits his consideration of the signifier to the spoken word, conceived as an ideal unit which resists destruction or division precisely because it is insubstantial. The privileging of the voice over writing, of course, is a central concern of Derrida’s from very early on, and I cannot do justice to this issue here. I simply want to note that, in this instance as with many others in Derrida’s work, what is at stake in the apparent privileging of the voice over writing is that it is, for Derrida, symptomatic of a desire to exclude from the order of what is here being called “the signifier” everything that has historically been associated with writing as something that is divorced from any intentional speaker: in particular, a certain uncontrollability that Derrida invoked with the term “dissemination.” It would be a desire, then, to exclude from the order of the signifier part of what defines

²³ In the Seminar and beyond, Derrida contends, Lacan “ceaselessly subordinates the letter, writing, and the text. For even when he repeats Freud on rebuses, hieroglyphics, engravings, etc., in the last analysis his recourse is always to a writing spiritualized (*relevé*) by the voice” (FV, 463). The phonematism of Lacan’s text, according to Derrida, extends to Lacan’s conception of “full speech,” which in turn becomes a key concern for Barbara Johnson in her response to Derrida. In brief, Johnson offers a kind of corrective in suggesting that what the “plenitude” of speech—which for Derrida is going to indicate the classical manner in which the signifier is idealized as, in effect, a signified—signifies for Lacan, in the Seminar and elsewhere in the *Écrits*, is not speech as full presence, but rather the play of the signifier evoked in what Derrida calls “writing.” Derrida subsequently attempts to dismiss this criticism in the “Envois” of *The Post Card*: “Lacan in truth meant to say what I said, what I will have said, under the heading of dissemination. What next!” Jacques Derrida, “*Envois*,” in *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 151.

it as the signifier—a process of articulation that cannot be precisely delimited and circumscribed—and not the signified.

It is not, however, that for Derrida Lacan actually reduces what he calls the signifier to a signified. It is that the way that Lacan describes the signifier is symptomatic of the fact that what Lacan refers to as the hole that the signifier supposedly carves out at the very center of subjectivity—thus “decentering” the subject—is in the end a determinable hole. At the core of the subject as Lacan describes it, Derrida is saying, there seems to be a definable absence—which is enough for this hole to be “filled in,” as Derrida puts it.

Certainly, the issues of Lacan’s reading of Poe and of Lacan’s privileging of the voice over writing are for Derrida of a piece with how Lacan’s thinking remains beholden to the metaphysical tradition, but the crux of his argument, I am suggesting, is his claim with regard to what Lacan refers to as a hole.²⁴ Derrida’s critique of Lacan, I want to suggest, concerns less how Lacan theorizes the signifier than it does how the play of the signifier itself comes to serve as a kind of transcendental foundation. The

²⁴ If there is any doubt about this point, we need only look to the important text of the lecture on “*Différance*” (1968). In preparing the text of the lecture for its republication in 1972 in *Marges de la philosophie*, Derrida included specific language in the lecture that clearly is intended at distancing his thinking from Lacan’s (Derrida adds this language around the same time that he is speaking about Lacan in the interview cited above from *Positions*). What Derrida is trying to specify with the term *différance*, he says, is something between speech and writing, a movement that is “never presented as such...never offered to the present.” He continues, “Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge or *in a hole with indeterminate borders* (for example, in a topology of castration).” Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6, my emphasis.

key issue in the reading of the Seminar elaborated in “The Purveyor of Truth” is that even though Lacan points to a hole at the center of subjectivity, this hole is hypostasized and comes to function as the centering element in the Lacanian schema. The indivisibility of the letter is the symptom, not the substance, of the problem for Derrida, I want to argue, and this is where I take my distance from Johnson.

The “de-centering” of the subject, Derrida is saying, has the paradoxical effect of actually re-centering the subject, in relation to a now missing or floating foundation, a hole. For Derrida, the symptom, we might say, of the way in which the supposedly de-centered subject is actually re-centered here (in a way that Lacan himself does not realize, so the claim goes) is Lacan’s emphasis on the indivisibility of the letter. Because, Derrida wants to say, it is in some sense the indivisibility of the letter—which gives a certain material form to the discursive structure Lacan is trying to describe—that ensures that the absent center, the hole, is always locatable and identifiable. In other words, the charge is that in this way Lacan introduces, in Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s terms, a “*logic of the signifier*” in the strongest sense of the word “logic.”²⁵ Derrida is not saying that the problem with Lacan’s account is that the signifier, as Lacan theorizes it, is not actually senseless in its operations and that at the core of subjectivity there is some self-standing thing instead of a hole. In other words, he is not saying that the problem is that the hole is actually “filled in.” Rather,

²⁵ Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 112-113. As Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe see it, “Despite everything that, by virtue of the signifier, opposes it, there is a systematic force at work in the ‘logic of the signifier’ that does not cease to reconstruct or recenter what Lacan’s critique of ‘monocentrism’ [the authors are referring to a comment made by Lacan in ‘Radiophonie’] aims at destroying or exceeding.” Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 112-113.

he is saying that in the Lacanian schema, this hole *itself* in the end comes to function as kind of foundation. So long as the absent center is determinable, Derrida is saying, the subject will not really be “de-centered.” It will be centered in relation to a given hole. Thus Derrida’s critique of Lacan is in some sense condensed in the questions he raises concerning the divisibility of the letter. There are other charges Derrida levels in “The Purveyor of Truth,” but this is the one that Derrida comes back to repeatedly in his later engagements with Lacan, and it is, to my mind, the crucial one at the very center of the debate.

Insofar as it is indivisible, insofar as it resists being divided further or destroyed, the letter is, on Derrida’s reading, assigned in the Lacanian “system” (FV, 462) a *proper* place, a more or less fixed and stable place, “a determined place with defined contours” (FV, 425). The locatable place of the letter is, for Derrida, delimited and traced out in its circulation within the intersubjective structure described in the Seminar. The letter “has a place” in the sense that, as Derrida puts it, the letter follows a “properly *circular*” (FV, 425) itinerary, whereby it ultimately always returns to the place of this hole: “...what the Seminar insists upon showing, finally, is that there is a single *proper* itinerary of the letter which returns to a determinable place that is always the same and that is *its own*” (FV, 436). On Derrida’s reading, no matter what Lacan says with regard to the itinerary of the letter as that of a potentially endless displacement, the path of the letter is, in actuality, constructed in such a way that it always circulates within the space of a given absence.

Certainly, the place and meaning of the letter are not at the disposition of the subjects. Certainly the latter are subjected to the movement of the signifier. But when Lacan says that the letter has no proper place, this must be understood henceforth as objective place, a place determinable in an empirical and naïve topology... For the signifier-letter, in the topology and psychoanalytico-transcendental semantics with which we are dealing, has a proper place and meaning which form the condition, origin, and destination of the entire circulation, as of the entire logic of the signifier. (FV, 437)

If Derrida insists upon this point, it is perhaps first of all because Lacan appears to suggest as much himself. With the purloined letter, Lacan notes,

we are quite simply dealing with a *letter* which has been *detoured*, one whose trajectory has been *prolonged* (this is literally the English word in the title), or, to resort to the language of the post office, a letter *en souffrance* (awaiting delivery or unclaimed)... Since it can be made to take a detour, it must have a trajectory *which is proper to it*—a feature in which its impact as a signifier is apparent here. (E, 21)

The signifier, Lacan continues, must be understood as “sustaining itself” in a displacement that “requires it to leave its place, if only to return to by a circular path” (E, 21).

For Lacan, since the letter both is and is not in its place, leaving always in some way comes back to the proper place from which it departed—hence the emphasis on the strangely “circular” path. But for Derrida, this rhetoric suggests the way that in Lacan’s schema the letter is always going to be in a given place: even if this place is no place at all, it is a nowhere that has been determined (by the psychoanalyst) as the hole at the very core of my subjectivity. It is in this precise sense that, as Derrida reads Lacan, the letter “always arrives at its destination”—even within the movement of an endless sliding, it will always be in the place psychoanalysis has assigned it.

This comment about the destination of the letter is equally at the center of the debate between Derrida and Lacan, though it has caused some confusion. Johnson, for instance, reads it as Derrida returning back to the issue he raises about Lacan's reading of Poe, whereby he reduces the literary text to simply an illustration of what psychoanalysis has to tell us. On this reading, when Lacan says that "what the 'purloined letter,' nay, the 'letter *en souffrance*,' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination" (E, 30), he is saying that, just as the place of the letter is clear to we psychoanalysts, the true meaning of Poe's text is equally clear.²⁶ Lacan insists, in other words, on the fact that the message contained in Poe's text is going to be properly delivered to its addressees (we psychoanalysts). But I think that Derrida reads this comment as a comment that reflects Lacan's conception of the hole as an empty place that is nonetheless capable of being identified by psychoanalysis as the ultimate ground of subjectivity. In short, so long as the letter remains indivisible, the contours of the hole that the functioning of the letter carves out are determinable. In which case, the subject of psychoanalysis will be more or less centered in relation to the signifier: "This transcendental signifier is therefore also the signified of all signifieds, and this is what finds itself sheltered within the indivisibility of the (graphic or oral) letter" (FV, 465). The effect of this conception of the signifier, Derrida suggests, is not the displacement of the subject, but rather its *recentering*.

²⁶ See Johnson, "The Frame of Reference," 225.

Repetition as a Function of the Signifier

But if Derrida sketches out what happens with this hole, he equally cannot see what Lacan is doing elsewhere to put into question the notion of a self-identical subject, primarily in rethinking the relation between life and death. We can see Lacan doing this work, I want to suggest, already in the Seminar on which the text of the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” is based; already, that is, in what has often been seen (mistakenly, in my view) as the “structuralist” phase of his thinking.²⁷ In order to develop this claim, I outline in this chapter a close reading of the 1954–55 Seminar (Seminar II).

As a way of framing my reading of this text, however, let me emphasize that Seminar II has to be understood as a text that is responding to the interpretation of Freud advanced by a number of other psychoanalysts, those of Anna Freud and Ernest Jones chief among them. To put it in fairly broad terms, Lacan’s reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in Seminar II will consistently underscore, counter to these prior canonical psychoanalytic readings of Freud, the manner in which *Beyond* remains entirely consistent with the entirety of Freud’s work prior to 1920. For Lacan, *Beyond* marks not a radical departure from the first topography and the theory of primary narcissism, a leap into quasi-biologicistic speculation, but rather a return to a

²⁷ I draw here on Bruce Fink’s essay “The Nature of Unconscious Thought or Why No One Ever Reads Lacan’s Postface to the ‘Seminar on the Purloined Letter’” and Slavoj Žižek’s essay “Hegel with Lacan, or the Subject and Its Cause” in *Reading Seminars I and II*. Both authors rebut the claim that Lacan’s thinking in this early phase is “structuralist” rather than “poststructuralist.” See *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

set of key concerns that in truth define Freudian psychoanalysis, its historical significance and its absolute originality.

The claim here is that after Freud introduces the theory of primary narcissism, the technique of psychoanalysis—practiced by the first generation of analysts trained by Freud himself—begins to cease being effective because it is too focused on strengthening the patient's ego. In essence, at this moment in the development of psychoanalysis, Lacan claims, the unconscious begins to stop speaking. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lacan argues, represents Freud's response to this crisis, one that will in effect *restore* to the unconscious a certain primacy vis-à-vis the preconscious and consciousness.

More specifically, at the level of his reading of Freud's corpus, Lacan's claim is that if we read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *The Ego and the Id* (1923) closely, we see Freud consistently emphasizing a key feature of his thinking that is at the core of psychoanalysis from the very beginning, going all the way back to 1895 when Freud attempts to sketch out, from a biological or neurological perspective, how the psyche is organized in a work he almost immediately abandons, the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. As Lacan presents it, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we see Freud underscoring (or reasserting) the essential precariousness not of the unconscious, but of consciousness; something Freud is trying to address already in the *Project* and then again in the first topography of the psychic apparatus he presents

in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Freud, Lacan points out, seems always to run into difficulty whenever he attempts to account for consciousness in his model of the psychic apparatus, whether he conceives of the psychic apparatus in energetic terms—the cathexis and anticathexis of certain memory traces or ideas—on the one hand, or in terms of topographically differentiated systems—the systems of the unconscious, the preconscious, and consciousness outlined in Chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*—on the other. Ultimately, then, Freud develops the so-called “structural” topography of *The Ego and the Id*, where the ego is explicitly envisioned as, strictly speaking, “a surface entity,” “a mental projection of the surface of the body” (SE 19: 26).²⁸

In order to grasp what is in fact at stake in the theory of the opposed “instincts” of 1920, Lacan insists, we need to situate it in relation to how Freud theorizes the agency of the ego at this point; on Lacan’s reading, the two are developed in parallel. For Lacan, this means situating the dualistic theory of the instincts in relation to everything Freud suggests with regard to the constitution of the ego in terms of imaginary and symbolic processes, an understanding of which is crucial to psychoanalytic technique, he thinks. In developing the theory of the death drive, Lacan is suggesting, Freud is in effect reemphasizing that beyond the ego, there remains a dimension of the unconscious that is radically other. Thus in Seminar II, Lacan will reread the Freudian theory of the repetition compulsion and the death

²⁸ “The ego,” Freud writes, “is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (SE 19: 26).

drive in terms of what for Lacan characterizes this dimension: namely, the play of the symbol (the unconscious, of course, being structured like a language for Lacan). He will reinterpret what Freud seems at times to envision as a fundamental psychic force pushing towards death in terms of the operations of “the signifier,” in terms of a linguistic function. Accordingly, for Lacan, “The death instinct isn’t an admission of impotence, it isn’t a coming to a halt before an irreducible, an ineffable last thing...”²⁹ Already, one can see that what Lacan refers to when he refers to the death drive here is not some enigmatic psychic force auguring, in Jean Laplanche’s phrase, “the abolition of all tension in the peace of the interstellar void.”³⁰

To the extent that the theory of the death drive marks, for Lacan, a return to a crucial feature of Freud’s thinking present there from the outset, the import of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* consists in the manner in which it rearticulates, or radicalizes—the manner in which it *renews*—the revolutionary thrust of Freudian psychoanalysis itself. On Lacan’s reading of Freud, the failure of the *Project* to flesh out a model of the psyche as an apparatus regulated by the influx and discharge of energy leads Freud to try out another approach in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where Freud glimpses, at the level of the dream-work, the functioning of the symbolic order. In Lacan’s words, it is in the *Traumdeutung* that Freud “discovers the operation of the symbol as such” (S2, 76). Or, to be more precise: “the manifestation of the symbol in

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, ed. J.A. Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1991), 70. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

³⁰ Jean Laplanche, “Masochism and the General Theory of Seduction,” trans. Luke Thurston, in *Essays on Otherness*, ed. John Fletcher (London: Routledge, 1999), 207.

the dialectical state, in the semantic state, in its displacements, puns, plays on words, jokes working all on their own in the dream machine” (S2, 76). The complex relation to Freud that is involved in Lacan’s “return to Freud” becomes evident at this point: in rereading Freud according to the function of the signifier, Lacan is not so much, or not simply, imputing to Freud a notion of linguistic structure inherited from Saussure, as much as he is rearticulating the emphasis, already legible in Freud, on the essentially (which is to say, noncontingent) linguistic manifestation of the unconscious in parapraxes, jokes, and dreams—indeed, with the notion of secondary revision, even the in the gaps produced in the narration of dreams. But in Seminar II, Lacan makes quite clear that the decentering force of the Freudian revolution is to be located not simply in the discovery of the symbolic as such, but rather in the manner in which this discovery functions to differentiate the subject of the unconscious from the ego. It is to be located, in other words, in the manner in which it shows that the subject of the unconscious is not reducible to the fictive identity of the ego. The speculative project of *Beyond*, then, Freud’s attempt to work out for himself whether there might be something beyond the pleasure principle, can be read for Lacan (at this point in his thinking) as Freud’s attempt think through how the operation of the symbolic function intrudes on the portion of the psychic economy that is governed by the pleasure principle.

The death drive is invoked here, in short, as a kind of key instance of the symbolic function at work, one form, or manifestation, of how the subject is, in the perspective

opened up by Freud, subject *to* the functioning of the signifier. We see the symbolic at work, as Lacan theorizes it here, in the type of repetition that comes to be associated with the repetition compulsion.³¹ As I attempt to show in what follows, for Lacan, we see it at work in the insistent interruption of the pleasure principle, an interruption that Lacan will associate with what Freud called the death drive.

Lacan's reading of *Beyond* will account for the particular relation between the pleasure principle and what Freud calls the death drive, then, thinking of repetition as an effect of the signifier; an effect which, Lacan insists, attests to the fact that the origins of the ego itself are to be located in the symbolic order. But the movement of Lacan's return to Freud is not simply one which proceeds to recast Freud in terms of structural linguistics, one which would discover the roots of the enigmatic death drive in the structure of language. If the return to Freud is more complicated, it is because the motif of repetition in Freud seems to inform the very notion of "the signifier" that Lacan develops.

In what follows, I attempt to track how Lacan theorizes the signifier in relation to repetition, and in turn, the death drive; that is, how Lacan theorizes the precise relation of "the letter" to the repetition compulsion and the death drive. An account

³¹ Beyond this manifestation, the death drive can equally manifest itself, according to Lacan, at the level of the imaginary, a register defined by the fantasy of a unifying plenitude. For instance, in the decomposition of this fictional image of unity in the fantasy of what Lacan calls "the body in pieces." Richard Boothby's study of Lacan's theory of the death drive brings out this point most clearly. See Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 143.

of Lacan's theorization of the signifier and repetition extends in the direction of an engagement with Lacan's notion of the signifier across a series of texts in the *Écrits* and beyond, as well as an account of the priority accorded the concept of the death drive in Lacanian metapsychology, one which, Richard Boothby suggests, is in fact at the very core of Lacan's "return to Freud."³² What follows here, however, pursues a specific aim, namely to elaborate how Lacan develops the notion of the signifier in relation to processes of repetition and the death drive by means of a reading of Seminar II (1954–5) on *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*—insofar as a reading of this text will allow me to say something about the relation between Derrida and Lacan. In general terms, over the course of the Seminar, Lacan theorizes the signifier as a structure of language which produces effects legible in the field of the analytic experience, and first and foremost, a form of repeated repetition; and this is equally the central claim of "The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" of the *Écrits*: the project of the "Seminar," Lacan makes clear from the outset, is to demonstrate that what Freud terms the repetition compulsion—which Lacan, for reasons that I will try to clarify below, terms "repetition automatism"³³— "has its basis in what I have called the *insistence* of the signifying chain" (E, 6). The "signifying chain" names for Lacan the structure of language in which the subject—

³² Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire*, 14.

³³ "...Freud realises that something doesn't satisfy the pleasure principle. He realises that what comes out of one of the systems—that of the unconscious—has a very particular insistence—that is the word I wanted to bring in. I say *insistence* because it expresses rather well, in a familiar way, the meaning of what has been translated into French as *automatisme de répétition*, *Wiederholungswang*. The word *automatisme* has resonances for us of the complete ascendancy of neurology. That isn't how it should be understood. What it is is a compulsion to repeat [*compulsion à la répétition*], and that is why I think I am making it concrete by introducing the notion of insistence" (S2, 61).

that is, “the subject of the unconscious” (E, 7)³⁴—is always already inscribed. The phenomenon of insistent repetition, Lacan will suggest, can be understood in terms of this linguistic structure, or more precisely, as an effect of what Lacan characterizes as its purely mechanistic mode of combinatory functioning. The broader claim of Seminar II thus concerns the manner in which the subject of the unconscious is in fact *constituted by* “the signifier.”

Lacan’s reading of Freud, however, entails a certain shift in emphasis, one that departs from the characterization of the death drive—present in *Beyond*, but not the only one in this complicated text, as I suggest in Chapter 1—as an unswerving psychic force distinct from the pleasure principle. In the movement of this shift, what Freud calls “the death drive” is reinterpreted as what names the disturbing, repetitive insistence of the signifier—repetition is understood by Lacan primarily in terms of insistence. As Lacan presents it, the notion of a psychic apparatus governed by the pleasure principle, and in turn, the reality principle—which is, Freud makes quite clear, only a modification of the pleasure principle—was already sketched, in its basic form, as early as 1895 in the *Project*; what is new in *Beyond*, then, is the precise notion of *repetition* traced there and the prospect that something might exceed the pleasure principle. In Lacan’s terms, the psychic apparatus had already been theorized as a system seeking equilibrium according to the law of a “restitutive”

³⁴ That is, the subject beyond the subject as it is traditionally conceived: “In the end, there exists a kind of mirror relation between the subject-individual and the decentred subject, the subject beyond the subject, the subject of the unconscious” (S2, 210).

tendency, which is, he argues, nothing other than a homeostatic principle. Initially, this restitutive tendency is not entirely distinguishable in the text from what Freud introduces in the form of a “repetitive tendency” (S2, 79). Indeed, as we saw in the reading of the child’s game of *fort/da* in Chapter 1, it is not initially clear that Freud isolates the tendency to repeat from the operations of the pleasure principle, insofar as this form of repetition can be construed, he suggests, as an attempt to master an experience of unpleasure, which is to say, to derive another kind of pleasure from it. But nevertheless, Freud glimpses the operations of *something else*, something beyond the pleasure principle: “Freud is constantly returning to a notion which always seems to elude him. It resists, but he doesn’t stop, he tries to maintain the originality of the repetitive tendency at all costs” (S2, 80).

If Freud ultimately gives this something else the name *Todestrieb*, Lacan argues, it does not mean that what he is invoking is the death of the human organism, the dissolution of all energy invested within it. And first and foremost because just such a notion is *already* implied in the very concept of the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle, on this view, “corresponds to a tendency to lower the excitation [in the living apparatus] to a minimum.” But, and this is crucial, the *minimum* can mean two things: it can mean “the minimum given a certain definition of the equilibrium of the system, or of the minimum purely and simply, that is to say, with respect to the living being, death” (S2, 80). It can mean the reduction of tension to a minimal deviation from a state of homeostasis, *or* it can mean the reduction of tension to *absolute zero*,

which, it would seem, has is nothing other than the death. But this is not what Freud is getting at with the concept of a drive towards “death,” according to Lacan:

There is something which is distinct from the pleasure principle and which tends to reduce all animate things to the inanimate—that is how Freud puts it. What does he mean by this? What obliges him to think that? Not the death of living beings. It’s human experience, human interchanges, intersubjectivity. Something of what he observes in man constrains him to step out of the limits of life.

No doubt there is a principle which brings the libido back to death, but it doesn’t bring it back any old how. If it brought it back there by the shortest paths, the problem would be resolved. But it brings it back there only along the paths of life, so it happens... It cannot find death along any old road.

In other words, the machine looks after itself, maps out a certain curve, a certain persistence. And it is along the very path of this subsistence that something else becomes manifest, sustained by this existence it finds there and which shows it its passage. (S2, 80–81)

On Lacan’s reading of Freud, then, what is called the death drive is *not* that which tends toward the dissolution of excitation animating life; it is, rather, that which makes itself manifest in the particular path, the particular set of *detours*, to which the living organism adheres with unwavering persistence. What makes itself manifest here is beyond “the limits of life,” not in the form of what demands the return to the inanimate, but in the form of what undergirds or structures intersubjectivity. What makes itself manifest is, Lacan specifies, “the circuit” of language.

The phrase “circuit of language” invokes, by condensing in a single phrase, the notion of language in general Lacan is employing here, one which echoes the description of the psychic apparatus in the passage above in terms of “the machine that looks after itself.” And so when Lacan speaks of the “circuit’ of language, he is speaking of language understood not as that which communicates a meaning—a medium for

communication, hence something which is secondary or subservient to the meaning it “carries”—but as that which functions as if on its own, as a symbolic system, and which necessarily precedes any and every subject, in which any and every subject is always already inscribed.³⁵ “Inscribed” in two senses: the structure of language in which the unconscious *is marked*, is legible—a structure characterized, precisely, by recurrent, repeating instances of interruption—and the structure of language in which the subject of the unconscious *is enmeshed*, in which it is situated from the very first. For the subject of the unconscious to be, one must be subjected to the order of the signifier. In Lacan’s terms, “one still has to be introduced into the circuit of language...And you’ll see that this is essential in relation to the death instinct, which seems the opposite” (S2, 83).

With the notion of the signifier, then, Lacan is attempting to account for the appearance of *death* in Freud’s writing as “the mask of the symbolic order” (S2, 326), what forces Freud to speculate on the existence of something beyond the limits of life. But the turn to the signifier in the reading of *Beyond* is equally aimed at accounting for the particular form of repetition Freud designates with the term “repetition compulsion,” at specifying “at what level the need for repetition is situated” (S2, 87). The “repetitive tendency,” it will be demonstrated, is situated *at*

³⁵ This is not a line of thinking that ontologizes the signifier, however. See Jacques Lacan, preface to *Jacques Lacan*, by Anika Lemaire, trans. David Macey (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), xiii. In this Preface to an academic thesis on Lacan’s work (one of the first), Lacan criticizes Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire for making this “substantialist” move in an early paper on the unconscious.

the level of “the signifier in the subject” (E, 14), at the level of what speaks beyond the imaginary semblance of coherence imposed by the “*moi*” (the ego).

On Lacan’s reading of *Beyond*, what Freud calls the repetition compulsion—generalized as “man’s need for repetition”—is to be situated at the level of “the intrusion of the symbolic register” (S2, 88).³⁶ This is a register which, while it enables the mirage of autonomous coherence proper to the ego, also introduces a dimension of irreducible otherness. Put another way, repetition is to be understood as but one trace of the fundamental *non-coincidence* of the subject of the unconscious. But the significance of repetition for Lacan is, on my reading, that it is precisely a trace which actually indicates something crucial about what produces it: the *manner* in which repetition imposes itself has an essential relation to that in which it has its basis. Repetition, Lacan specifies in Seminar II, ought to be understood as an effect of the “form” of the signifier, the form of a circuit of signification which does not communicate a meaning, which does not, properly speaking, *signify*, “...which is just at the limit between sense and non-sense, which is problematic” (S2, 90). What Lacan has in mind here is a notion of “the signifier” as a structure of language which, in its functioning, does not produce *signification*, does not transmit “a meaning.” Hence in “The Agency of the Letter,” Lacan refers to the modality of the signifier in terms of “*signifiance*”—a kind of pure algorithmic functioning prior to signification

³⁶ Later in the same lecture, Lacan puts it this way: “That’s what the need for repetition is, as we see it emerge beyond the pleasure principle...It is only introduced by the register of language, by the function of the symbol” (S2, 90).

proper (*significance*) (E, 424).³⁷ Insofar as the signifier does not communicate a meaning, insofar as it is defined by a kind of pure operativity without meaning, it is “problematic.”³⁸

But crucially, the claim that the problematic operations of the signifier produce repetition can only be articulated, according to the logic of the “return to Freud,” by means of a reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; and so the task in Seminar II becomes that of demonstrating how Freud projects the insight into the need for repetition as a function of a structure of language onto an apparently *biological* model of the psychic apparatus governed by the interplay of two opposed sets of drives. What remains to be demonstrated, then, is how the explicit terms of Freud’s text can be understood according to the terms introduced in the Lacanian rereading. At this point, then, two crucial questions emerge: first, if the signifier produces effects which exceed the apparent coherence of the ego, why should this take the form of insistent *repetition*; and second, why should the order of “the signifier” “*be*” death—that is, why exactly should the signifier be aligned with a drive towards death?

³⁷ See Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 49. Fink chooses to translate this term as “signifierness.” In “The Instance of the Letter,” Lacan speaks of “The linguistic structure that enables us to read dreams [which] is at the crux of the “*significance* of dreams,” at the crux of the *Traumdeutung*” (E, 424).

³⁸ This notion of the “pure operativity” of the signifier is bolstered by recent work done by Lydia H. Liu. Liu, approaching Lacan’s thinking on the symbolic from the perspective of how he adopts cybernetics and game theory imported from the U.S. at this moment in his teaching, suggests that Lacan actually envisions something like a “cybernetic unconscious” here. As Liu puts it, “Lacan developed a notion of language that brought him closer to the symbolic logic of mathematicians than the alleged affinity with Ferdinand de Saussure or modern linguistics.” Lydia H. Liu, “The Cybernetic Unconscious: Rethinking Lacan, Poe, and French Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 290.

On Lacan's reading of *Beyond*, repetition is a function of the signifier in the precise sense that it is an effect, reproduced within the analytic situation, of the *autonomous functioning* of the signifier in the subject. An effect, in other words, of the signifier which operates, mindlessly, like a machine, producing, as Freud characterizes it in *Beyond*, nothing but interminable, repeated repetition.³⁹ In Seminar II, Lacan puts it this way: "From the start, and independently of any attachment to some supposedly causal bond, the symbol already plays, and produces by itself, its necessities, its structures, its organisations" (S2, 193). There is something peculiar, or particular, to the signifier, it would seem then, that produces the specific effects of repetition Freud observes.

But the very significance of repetition for Lacan, I am suggesting, consists in the fact that it indicates something about what produces it. The manner in which repetition imposes itself is an index of the structure of language in which, in Lacan's terms (from the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"), repetition automatism "has its basis." The name Lacan gives to the specific mode of repetition at stake here is *insistance*, "insistence." As Lacan presents it, the "insistence" of repetition is already implied in the very notion of the compulsion to repeat as Freud elaborates it. Indeed, in the very word with which Freud designates it:

The beyond of the pleasure principle is expressed in the word *Wiederholungszwang*. This is incorrectly translated in French by *automatisme*

³⁹ I draw here on John Forrester's reading of Lacan's early seminars. As he writes, "With the machine of the 'Seminar on *The purloined letter*', what emerges is...the function of repetition, as generated by the pure logic of the symbol—by the machine..." John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 191.

de répétition and I think I am giving you a better rendition with the notion of *insistence* [*insistance*], repetitive insistence, significant insistence. This function is at the very root of language in so far as a world is a universe subjected to language. (S2, 206)

The term “insistence” describes, for Lacan, the *form* of the repetition involved with the repetition compulsion: a type of persistent, recurrent intrusion. There is an “insistence” proper to the repetition compulsion, then, in the sense that it continually persists in its pressing interruptions. If, as I have suggested, repetition is linked for Lacan to the order of the signifier, then it is because it is understood as an effect of a signifying function which has no meaning beyond its *pure functioning* as such, the continual unfolding of a chain of signifiers. Such a pure functioning is legible, according to Lacan, in the manner in which repressed material persistently seeks expression, in the manner in which “the repressed is always there, insisting, and demanding to be” (S2, 308). In this way, the term “insistence” also describes the particular *structure* in which repetition has its basis, the structure of “the signifying chain” as continually *in the process* of unfolding, never arriving at completion. In its functioning, then, the symbolic order is, strictly speaking, never fully realized; it is continually “insisting to be, that is what Freud has in mind when he talks about the death instinct as being what is most fundamental—a symbolic order in travail, in the process of coming, insisting on being realised” (S2, 326). As Lacan formulates it in the passage cited above, significant insistence is a “function...at the very root of language,” a structural feature of the signifier. The insistence of the signifier could thus be described, on my reading, as a structural feature of the signifier as a process of differential articulation without identity.

Insofar as he refers to what Freud terms “repetition compulsion” as “repetitive insistence,” Lacan actually conceives of repetition in a slightly different manner than does Freud: the term insistence emphasizes the capacity of the repetition compulsion to interrupt, to impose upon, or short circuit the otherwise smooth functioning of the pleasure principle, whereas there remains a sense in which Freud theorizes the form of repetition proper to the compulsion to repeat as repetition of the same. In Chapter 3 of *Beyond*, for instance, the “daemonic” power of the repetition compulsion is said to manifest itself in those who show no signs of neurosis but who appear to be “pursued by a malignant fate” (SE 18: 21); and Freud characterizes this fate as the “perpetual recurrence of the same thing” (SE 18: 22). In order for Lacan’s rearticulation of Freud to be intelligible, then, it is necessary to read Lacan’s notion of repetition as one which emphasizes repetitive insistence as a type of repeating *interruption* and deemphasizes the identity of that which is repeated in the repetitive process.

But Lacan’s rereading of Freud nevertheless retains the sense of Freud’s text whereby, despite what Freud will ultimately say about two opposed groups of drives, the compulsion to repeat seems not *oppose* the pleasure principle so much as it takes it over, “overrides” it, *from within*, deflecting it from its original course. Lacan’s text retains the sense in which the repetition compulsion inhabits the pleasure principle in the form of what is more fundamental than the regulation of pleasure, that which is “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which

it over-rides” (SE 18: 23). Stated most simply, then, it is not that for Lacan the order of “life” and the pleasure principle—conceived in terms of an energetics—is opposed to that which lies beyond it, the lifeless symbolic function, “the signifier.” Rather, it is more accurate to say that, in the Lacanian schema, *both* the pleasure principle *and* repetition as repetitive insistence belong to the order of the signifier. The passage through the “defiles of the signifier” institutes the pleasure principle as well as something which disrupts it.

Accordingly, repetitive “insistence” is not an effect of *another* principle beyond the pleasure principle; it is *itself* a function of the very operations of the signifier and the order of the pleasure principle it gives rise to. Repetitive insistence is, on this view, nothing other than what Adrian Johnston terms an “auto-disruption” of life as it is lived under the sway of the pleasure principle.⁴⁰ This, I think, is the only way to reconcile the correlation, in Lacan’s text, between “repetition” and signification; and this is what Lacan has in mind when he says the following:

...the compulsion to repeat, in as much as it is beyond the pleasure principle, beyond relations, rational motivations, beyond feelings, beyond anything to which we can accede. In the beginnings of psychoanalysis, this beyond is the unconscious, in so far as we cannot reach it, it’s the transference in so far as that is really what modulates feelings of love and hatred, which aren’t the transference—the transference is what makes it possible for us to interpret this language composed out of everything the subject can present us with... *That is what the beyond of the pleasure principle is. It is the beyond of signification. The two are indistinguishable.* (S2, 188, emphasis added)

⁴⁰ Adrian Johnston, *Zizek’s Ontology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 186.

“Beyond the pleasure principle,” there is not some other principle. The order of the pleasure principle is founded on what Lacan calls simply “signification,” but signification is continually interrupted, it is perpetually “*in travail*.”

The “repetitive insistence” of signification, I am suggesting, ought to be understood as an effect of something within the very structure of signification itself. This aspect of repetition can be illustrated as well with reference to Lacan’s notion of symbolic *identification*, that is, how the symbolic order constitutes a type of prop in the constitution of the “*moi*” (the ego) via the mirage of coherent identity. With this notion, Lacan begins to account for the origins of the ego as something of a byproduct of an identification with the signifier. It is in this precise sense, then, that Lacan speaks of “the supremacy of the signifier in the subject” (E, 14), as the priority of the signifier as that which *constitutes* the subject as such. While in his early work, Lacan appears to conceive of symbolic identification as a parallel process to the genesis of the “*moi*” at the level of the imaginary famously described in the essay on the mirror stage, in his later work, as Adrian Johnston demonstrates, Lacan tends to conceive of symbolic identification as a necessary precondition for the misrecognition of the “self” in the mirror stage.

But what is crucial here, however, is simply that in both cases Lacan’s formulation of symbolic identification brings into clearer focus how the intrusion of the signifier disrupts the form of coherent subjectivity it nonetheless makes possible. That is, for

Lacan, the symbolic, and the process of “subjectification” it bespeaks, lends the subject of the signifier a “mirage” (S2, 209) of coherence and the promise of a selfsame identity *even as* it retains a residue of the “primordial discord” (as Lacan calls it in the essay on the mirror stage) it effaces—the stain of what it circumscribes. The identificatory function of the signifier is analogous to that of the image in the mirror: the iterability of signifying units endows the subject of language with a certain unity and continuity across a series of utterances; hence the intrusion of the signifier—prior to which, I want to underscore, there is no subject—makes possible the assumption of a unifying *imago*, the taking on of the stabilizing coherence of identity. But this process of identification *also* entails taking on a certain failure internal to signification, the manner in which the fictive unity it enables fails to cohere. On my reading, it is precisely this failure of signification Lacan specifies when he insists that the symbolic is continually “insisting to be”—“in the process of coming, insisting on being realized” (S2, 326).

For Lacan, the failure of symbolization Freud gestures toward in *Beyond* is in actuality traced, in advance, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The very notion of the symbolic order, Lacan suggests, is embodied in what Freud calls the dream-work, the various processes of dream formation operating on the latent “dream-thoughts”: “This work is a symbolization, with all its laws, which are those of signification...Its order is always that of overdetermination, or again that of significant motivation” (S2, 212). And yet, Lacan clarifies what exactly is at issue for Freud here, which in actuality is

not the content of the dream-thoughts, but rather the particular form of the dream's articulation of *desire* (a term that corresponds to, and recodes, what Freud describes as the *wish* of the dream).⁴¹ In Freud's terms, the "particular *form* of thinking" (SE 5: 506) proper to dreams in general. "It is the *dream-work* which creates that form," Freud underscores, "and it alone is the essence of dreaming" (SE 5: 506–507). The "essence" of dreaming, then, consists *not* in the latent content of the dream—which, Freud insists, can be made accessible to waking thought⁴²—but in the disfiguring distortion of the dream-work; a *work*, an operation, in which desire is manifest not as a given but as what, in this very process of distortion, refuses to make itself known, in *its withdrawal*.⁴³ And this, according to Lacan, is what is at issue for Freud in the general theory of dreams:

Fundamentally, when Freud speaks of desire as the mainspring of symbolic formations, from the dream to the joke via all the facts taken from the psychopathology of everyday life, he is always concerned with this moment when what comes into existence via the symbol *isn't yet*, and hence can in no way be named. (S2, 211, emphasis added)

In formulating the laws of symbolization, on this view, Freud is concerned with specifying a desire which somehow belongs to signification, comes to be articulated

⁴¹ Weber, *Return to Freud*, 120.

⁴² "The dream-thoughts are entirely rational," Freud writes, "and are constructed with an expenditure of all the psychical energy of which we are capable. They have their place among thought-processes that have not become conscious—processes from which, after some modification, our conscious thoughts, too, arise... On the other hand, the second function of mental activity during dream-construction, the transformation of the unconscious thoughts into the content of the dream, is peculiar to dream-life and characteristic of it. This dream-work proper diverges further from our picture of waking thought than has been supposed even by the most determined depreciator of psychical functioning during the formation of dreams. The dream-work is not simply more careless, more irrational, more forgetful and more incomplete than waking thought; it is completely different from it qualitatively and for that reason not immediately comparable with it" (SE 5: 506–507). On this passage, see Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 102–103.

⁴³ See Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter*, 82.

within the mechanisms of the dream-work, but which is not properly *present* in it (it “isn’t yet”).

According to Lacan, Freud is not conceiving of this something as if it were “on the other side” of symbolization, prior to it. Instead, he is conceiving of it as something “unnameable” that only appears as such from *within* the order of signification. The problem Freud confronts in the attempt to account for the “mainspring” of the dream, then, is this: “From the moment when desire has already come into this, when it is caught from end to end in the dialectic of alienation and no longer has any other means of expression...how can what hadn’t yet been be met again?” (S2, 212). For Lacan, what lacks the status of presence in the order of the signifier can only be represented within it as “the unnameable” (S2, 211). And what’s more, Lacan continues, “It is in fact because it is unnameable, with all the resonances you can give to this name, that it is akin to the quintessential unnameable, that is to say to death” (S2, 211).

Insofar as the signifier institutes *both* repetition and the economy of “life” governed by the pleasure principle, there is no other way, in other words, for what is “not yet” to manifest itself than as an interruption of life, *as death*. Or to be more precise, as death in a very particular sense; not death understood as the dissolution of the animate, nor conceived along the lines of a Heideggerian notion of death as what constitutes my ownmost possibility although in a way that I cannot represent it for

myself. Rather, as Lacan repeats throughout Seminar II, he is referring to death understood according to the terms of what in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is theorized as “death in so far as that is what life resists” (S2, 206). The reason why the signifier should “be” death, then, is located here. In truth, Lacan’s formulation of death as what life “resists” hinges on the particular concept of resistance invoked here: throughout Seminar II, Lacan situates resistance on the side of *the ego*—and this is very much in keeping with how Freud theorizes it in Chapter 3 of *Beyond* (“There is no doubt that the resistance of the conscious and unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle” [SE 18: 20])—and, as such, it is correlated, at the level of the psychic apparatus conceived in terms of an economy regulated by the pleasure principle, with the “inertia” (Lacan’s word, echoing Freud) of the homeostatic mechanism. That is, it is correlative with the manner in which “life” as Freud envisions it in *Beyond* consists, precisely, in a tendency to *resist* everything that would disrupt the equilibrium of the psychic apparatus. But even if the repetition compulsion seems to present Freud with another form of resistance, insofar as repetition of “unwanted situations” and “painful emotions” in the transference compel Freud’s patients to “seek to bring about the interruption of the treatment while it is still incomplete” (SE 18: 21), according to Lacan, repetition is not a form of resistance. “Everything connected with the transference belongs in a dimension pertaining to an entirely different register—it belongs to the order of an insistence” (S2, 210–211). Later in the Seminar, Lacan puts it this way: “Freud insists on the following, that after the reduction of the resistances, there is a residue which may be

what is essential. Here he introduces the notion of repetition” (S2, 321). In Lacan’s words, the symbolic order “tends beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the limits of life” (S2, 326).

But there is also something about the particular structure of “the signifier” itself as Lacan theorizes it that necessitates its association, in Freud’s text, with death. In other words, what I want to specify here, as a way of concluding my discussion of Lacan’s notion of the signifier, is the *deathly dimension* of the signifier. If there is such a dimension, I am suggesting, it is because the intrusion of the signifier colonizes or cannibalizes “life,” subjecting it to the “pure operativity” (Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s phrase) of a signifying structure that functions, as Lacan insists throughout Seminar II, *like a machine*. At the level of Lacan’s general rearticulation of Freud, the order of the signifier is deathly in the sense that it is structurally distinct from the imaginary register of the libidinal economy, even though it is (as we saw in the case of symbolic identification) nonetheless intertwined with the imaginary in certain respects. In Lacan’s words, “the symbolic order...isn’t the libidinal order in which the ego is inscribed, along with all the drives. It tends beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the limits of life, and that is why Freud identifies it with death” (S2, 326). The intrusion of the signifier is the intrusion of something other than “life” into the psychic economy, an inanimate structure of language which, although it institutes “life” as it is lived under the sway of the pleasure principle, *is itself utterly lifeless*,

operating solely according to the logic of a combinatory function founded on the differential relation between signifiers.

On my reading of Lacan, for the claim that the signifier “is” death to be intelligible, the signifier must be understood primarily in terms not of its “itinerary,” which will form one of the crucial terms in Derrida’s critique of Lacan, but rather in terms of what could be termed its *irreducibility* (a term that resonates with what has been described as the “insistence” of the signifying chain). The order of the signifier is precisely that which, in the animate, is *irreducible to life*, and thus suggests, for Lacan as for Freud, the figure of a type of death—a deathly something that, as long as it insists, refuses to be subsumed into life and imposes itself, mortifying what it inhabits. What Lacan calls simply “the signifier,” then, is that deathly thing installed in life itself, disturbing it from within in the form of insistent interruption. Or to put it more forcefully, insofar as the signifier is the very condition of “life,” the death drive for Lacan names the unshakable tendency of “life” to interrupt and disrupt itself. On Lacan’s reading of Freud, I am suggesting, the disruptive tendency of the death drive is traced to the self-interrupting structure of the symbolic insofar as it is always “a symbolic order in travail” (S2, 326). To put it simply, the notion of the signifier Lacan develops in Seminar II does not sit easily with a metaphysics—it suggests not a metaphysics of life and death, but rather the immanence of death to life Derrida himself attempts to think through with notion of “life death.” The relation between the order of life and the order of death in Lacan seems to be much closer than Derrida

himself admits to the relation Derrida describes in speaking of the *stricture*, the entanglement, of “life death.”

Thus, even if, as Derrida in effect demonstrates in “The Purveyor of Truth,” Lacan’s discourse remains beholden to a certain type of metaphysical thinking—and to my mind, it is hard not to be persuaded by the reading of Lacan Derrida advances there—Lacan’s discourse equally militates against metaphysics. Derrida and Lacan, I am suggesting, are not as far apart as they might seem: there is a certain proximity between Derrida and Lacan that can be traced in how they theorize the death drive. What we find in Derrida and Lacan’s thinking is not the metaphysical notion of a self-standing drive or tendency that opposes itself to life. Rather, we encounter a notion of life as continually interrupted from within, divided against itself, so that “death” is, as Derrida would say, inscribed within what makes possible and sustains life.

It is not simply, then, that Lacan’s discourse is not entirely exhausted by its belonging to metaphysics. On the contrary, it is that the particular manner in which it seems to resist metaphysics is in fact much closer than Derrida acknowledges to the manner in which deconstruction itself resists metaphysics. Thus we might begin to see here why—as Derrida himself put it in “For the Love of Lacan,” but without following through on what he seemed to indicate there—Lacan’s discourse was in certain respects so close to his own. That is, we might begin to see why Lacan’s discourse

was, for Derrida, already from a very early moment, “*at the same time* the closest and the most deconstructible, the one that was most to be deconstructed...” (FLL, 55).

Chapter 3:

The Most Resistant Resistance: Derrida and Freud

Ten years after the publication of his major book on Freud, Derrida returned to Freud in an essay on the notion of “resistance to analysis.” “Resistances” (1991) is a meditation on resistance to, and within, psychoanalysis—the phrase comes to me from Jacqueline Rose¹—but it is also a meditation on how deconstruction resists the philosophical tradition it set out to analyze or deconstruct. “I have always loved this word,” Derrida says of resistance, “This word, which resonated in my desire and my imagination as the most beautiful word in the politics and history of this country, this word loaded with all the pathos of my nostalgia, as if, at any cost, I would like not to have missed blowing up trains, tanks, and headquarters between 1940 and 1945...”² Trying to think for a moment about whatever it is that impels him toward this word, Derrida turns to Freud. For Freud, however, this word had a quite different meaning. If, in France, the term necessarily invokes the memory of the French Resistance as heroic resistance to Nazism, in psychoanalysis, resistance is something else entirely. It is not liberation from the forces of oppression, the path to freedom but, as Rose

¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), 35. Hereafter cited parenthetically. Rose’s mediation on this concept of resistance occupies a central place for me in this chapter.

² Jacques Derrida, “Resistances,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 2. Hereafter cited parenthetically. Elsewhere, around the same time, Derrida describes continually daydreaming about “being a resistance fighter in the last war blowing up bridges or trains...” Jacques Derrida, “Circumfession,” in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 208.

writes, “repetition, blockage, blind obeisance to crushing internal constraint” (LR, 21).

Strangely enough, then, the Freud Derrida turns to in this “quasi-auto-analysis” (R, 26) is the Freud who continually wrestled with resistance, and who—late in his life, after the Great War and on the eve of the events that would force him to flee Vienna for London—increasingly came to see this struggle as one in which psychoanalysis was simply not destined to prevail. But as I will show, looking at Derrida’s engagement with Freud in the 1990s, the Freud Derrida turns to in “Resistances” is also the “tragic Freud” who, in Derrida’s words, “talked it out with death.”³ In Derrida’s work on Freud in this period, we shall see, the death drive, and the relation between life and death, once again comes to be at the center of Derrida’s reading of Freud. And when it resurfaces in the texts from this period, I hope to show, Derrida outlines another approach to the problematic of life and death traced in *The Post Card*.

The Notion of Analysis

In the 1990s, almost thirty years after “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida turns to Freud in a text that is ultimately about what deconstruction is. In “Resistances,” Derrida approaches this question in terms of the relation between deconstruction and

³ Jacques Derrida, “‘To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis,” in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 104. There, it is clear that for Derrida Foucault missed something in not coming to terms with this Freud. I will come back to and discuss this text in more detail in what follows.

analysis, in terms of how deconstruction might be understood as a kind of analysis, rather than, say, a form of critique.⁴ I say “a kind” of analysis because Derrida is equally concerned with showing that deconstruction is not *simply* a type of analysis, for reasons that I hope will become clear in what follows. “Resistances” is, above all, a reflection on how deconstruction might be understood as a certain form of analysis that is somewhat different than analysis as it has traditionally been understood—analysis as a technique of untying, undoing, and breaking things down to their most elementary element—and, in this way, follows on the example of psychoanalysis. In a way, then, we see Derrida returning in “Resistances” to one of the issues at the center of his work on Freud from the mid-60s: the question of the apparent proximity between deconstruction and psychoanalysis.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, for Derrida both deconstruction and psychoanalysis inherit a traditional understanding of analysis, they have no choice but to draw upon the traditional “axiomatics” of analysis. Both deconstruction and psychoanalysis, then, necessarily inherit a *problematic* conception of analysis. If the traditional concept of analysis is problematic, for Derrida, it is because any and every form of analysis entails a kind of “double orientation”: on the one hand, an *archaeological* orientation,

⁴ See Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Vol. II*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). For instance: “All the same, and in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*, and its translation would have to take that into consideration. It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *undecomposable origin*. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in a general sense or in a Kantian sense.” Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” 4. I thank David Marriott for directing me to this reference.

aimed at the return to the most simple, to the element that cannot be broken down, to the origin itself, and on the other, a *philolytic* orientation, an insistence on analysis as a fundamentally dissociative technique of breaking down, deriving, or undoing (R, 19–20). Thus both deconstruction and psychoanalysis inherit a notion of analysis that will always be defined by a kind of internal tension. As long as the tendency to continually break down, undo, or dissolve continues to operate, analysis can never achieve the return to the most elementary element *itself*.

The difference between deconstruction and psychoanalysis, Derrida suggests in “Resistances,” is that only deconstruction *reflects on* this complication whereby analysis can never actually touch the thing it attempts to disclose. Psychoanalysis points towards this problem, Derrida wants to say, precisely in its dealings with resistance, but it never manages to analyze it. As soon as Freud defines resistance in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) as “whatever interrupts the progress of analytic work” (SE 5: 517), analysis in psychoanalysis is bound up with resistance.

Psychoanalytic analysis thus comes to be defined, from the very beginning (or very nearly the beginning), by the way it has to reckon with resistance. And in wrestling with resistance, we ought to hear Derrida saying, Freud stages, as it were, how the task of analysis can never achieve closure; Freud, in one of the last essays he wrote, famously acknowledges that psychoanalysis might be *interminable*.⁵ The difference

⁵ I have occasion to discuss Freud’s famous essay “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” (1937) below, but for now, it suffices to cite Freud when he notes “analysis can only draw upon definite and limited amounts of energy which have to be measured against the hostile forces. And it seems as if victory is in fact as a rule on the side of the big battalions” (SE 23: 240).

between deconstruction and psychoanalysis, then, is that only deconstruction attempts to think through this complication and thereby to question the traditional concept of analysis to which it adheres. “What is called ‘deconstruction’ undeniably obeys an *analytic* exigency, at once critical and analytic,” Derrida writes, and thus it too contains the double motif of the archaeological and the philolytic: it is both a dissociative desedimenting and deconstituting and a “critico-genealogical” return to overlooked elements or origins (R, 27). And yet, simultaneously, Derrida continues, “deconstruction begins only with a resistance to this double motif. It even radicalizes *at the same time* its axiomatics and the critique of its axiomatics” (R, 27). In other words, if deconstruction manages to resist the traditional axiomatics of analysis, it is on account of how deconstruction adheres to them, in a radical, “hyperbolic” fashion, as Derrida puts it. Deconstruction turns the procedure of analysis back on itself, putting its basic presuppositions into question. Thus, according to Derrida, “What is put in question by its work is not only the possibility of recapturing the originary but also the desire to do so or the phantasm of doing so, the desire to rejoin the simple, whatever that may be...” (R, 27).

The implication here is fairly clear: Freud may have cast doubt on the *possibility* of analysis ever actually reaching its goal, but he never questioned the logic—the metaphysical logic—whereby psychoanalytic analysis aims at uncovering some fundamental, originary element. Derrida went on to flesh out this claim in *Archive Fever* (1994)—most notably, in his reading of Freud’s analysis of Jensen’s *Gradiva*,

in which Derrida picks up on what he wants to call “an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”⁶ But it is equally clear in *Archive Fever* (where it had not been earlier in “Resistances”) that Derrida sees a persistent tension in Freud’s work as to whether psychoanalysis aims always at recovering origins, whereby sometimes Freud’s discourse actually puts into question the very idea of such an origin even as, at the same time, it redeploys or repeats it. The notion that Freud’s discourse is divided on this issue, and elsewhere as Derrida suggests, is ultimately what I want to take from Derrida, insofar as this is in some sense Derrida’s claim about Freud from the beginning.

If Derrida returns in “Resistances” to questions he was dealing with in “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” he also returns to an approach to reading Freud he employed in that earlier text. In “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida’s focus came to center on the different metaphors or models Freud uses to describe the psychic apparatus at different moments in his thought, from the early “Project for a Scientific Psychology” from 1895 all the way up to the famous (in no small part on account of Derrida’s essay) “Note on the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” written after *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1925. As Derrida reads Freud in this early text, Freud glimpses something in this early work, at the very beginning, that he never loses sight of, and which drives him to try out a number of different ways of describing or representing

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 91.

the psychic apparatus: namely, the *dual requirement* of the apparatus that it simultaneously have an inexhaustible capacity to retain memory traces, *and* the capacity to receive any number of fresh impressions. The problem Derrida sees Freud continuously wrestling with, then, is simply how to unite these two functions *in the same machine*; and this is what dictates the way Freud keeps turning to different models for this apparatus, none of which will prove entirely adequate prior to the Mystic Pad.

From the notion of “pathbreaking” and facilitations in the account of how memory traces are formed and recalled in the *Project*, Freud moves on to the image of a compound microscope, telescope, or photographic apparatus. Speaking of memory and perception and the different psychical systems—of the unconscious, the preconscious, and consciousness—lends itself to the notion of different localities in the mind, Freud notes, but this is not what he has in mind when he speaks of “psychical locality,” he says. Rather, he is thinking of a purely “ideal” or virtual place, akin to the ideal point in a telescope where the image coalesces, located *between* the lenses that refract the rays of light (SE 5: 536). But even the comparison to these optical machines is imperfect, Freud is quick to point out, given the difficulty of conceiving of one that, like the psyche, both registers an image and retains it. Of course, a telescope or a microscope captures the image momentarily, but it has no capacity to hold onto it; the photographic negative, on the other hand, registers and retains an imprint, but once it has been exposed and developed, it is unable to receive

any new impressions. The two capabilities Freud envisions coming together in the psychic apparatus will remain “out of phase” as Derrida puts it,⁷ until 1925, when Freud turns to a child’s toy to represent the psyche. The Mystic Pad, recall, consists of a receptive wax tablet in contact with a translucent sheet of paper upon which one writes. This sheet of paper is attached loosely to the wax tablet beneath it in such a way that the contact between the two can be broken—thus “erasing” the marks visible on its surface, even as the trace of those marks remains on the tablet below. By periodically raising the translucent sheet, one can always refresh its capacity for new impressions, while the tablet below retains the contours of the each inscription. The dual requirement Freud recognizes as early as the *Project*, then, is captured much later in the example of the Mystic Pad.

Derrida employs a similar approach to reading Freud in “Resistances.” If before Derrida looked at the Freudian corpus from the perspective of the different models Freud turns to in order to describe the psychic apparatus, in this later text he in effect recasts the entirety of Freud’s work as the development of a certain approach to dealing with resistance. On the one hand, Derrida suggests, resistance—both the concept and the thing—is central to the invention of psychoanalysis as a technique distinct from hypnosis and suggestion, something that Freud is addressing already in

⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 221.

Studies on Hysteria (1895)⁸; namely, when the patient's defenses in the face of hypnosis prove insurmountable, Freud develops another technique for bringing to light what has been repressed from consciousness and banished from memory (R, 16). Resistance is bound up with analysis in psychoanalysis from the very beginning, then; over the course of his life, Derrida continues, Freud will continuously affirm that analysis consists not simply in disclosing to the patient the previously hidden meaning of the symptom, the dream, and so on, but rather in an intervention that must counter the patient's resistances.

On the other hand, Derrida writes, "psychoanalysis developed not only as the analysis of individual psychic resistances but as a practical analysis of the cultural, political, and social resistances represented by hegemonic discourses" (R, 20). Certainly, Freud's analyses of religion—here we should think of not only *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Future of an Illusion* (1927), but also *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) given the reading of this text Derrida will outline in *Archive Fever*—and his treatment of "civilization" consistently point out the resistance according to which these things are viewed as a product of man's "higher nature," rather than an attempt simply to temper his innate aggressivity. But in rereading Freud in this way, the suggestion is also, just as it was in "Freud and the Scene of Writing," that Freud glimpses

⁸ In *Studies on Hysteria*, Derrida notes, Freud already identifies a number of different kinds of manifest and concealed forms of resistance, thirty years before the inventory of the various forms of resistance he puts forward in an appendix to *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926).

something at the very beginning that he cannot entirely resolve, and which then comes to be installed much later in *another* figure, another concept.

The difficulty in this instance has to do with resistance and the work of analysis (as a way of negotiating with resistance), a difficulty that Derrida will see at work in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in those places where for Freud dream interpretation runs aground, where it reaches a point beyond which it cannot go. Freud famously refers to this place as “the navel of the dream,” first in his analysis of the “specimen dream” of Irma’s injection and then again in the section on the forgetting of dreams. For Derrida, then, something is broached in the encounter with the navel of the dream that will persist in Freud’s thinking and in the development of psychoanalytic practice, awaiting some future moment when Freud will finally find a way of working through it. I say “is broached” in Freud’s text here because—unlike in the case of the dual requirement of the psychic apparatus that Freud remarks on explicitly—Derrida seems to suggest that what Freud runs up against when he speaks of the navel of the dream is not something that is recognized as a problem that he will continue to return to, but rather something that Freud stages but does not reflect on or analyze, and thus something that *deconstruction* will have disinterred in the strata of Freud’s text. Part of what I am tracking in this chapter, then, is how Derrida brings out this difficulty in his reading of Freud.

The Specimen Dream

As Laplanche and Pontalis show, the concept of “resistance to analysis” is present in Freud’s thinking from the very first, and it is, as Derrida suggests, in recognizing that the patient may resist suggestion and hypnosis, that Freud turns away from these techniques.⁹ Freud abandons hypnosis, by his own account, because it merely sidesteps the patient’s resistance: “Hypnosis does not do away with the resistance but only avoids it and therefore yields only incomplete information and transitory therapeutic success” (SE 7: 252).¹⁰ Rose is also a helpful guide in this territory. As soon as Freud recognizes that analysis, if it is to make any progress at all, has to reckon with the patient’s resistance, she notes, “Slowly but surely, [resistance] takes up its full meaning as struggle against the unconscious, and from there, as canny, resourceful and above all stubborn refusal to cooperate” (LR, 24). This notion of resistance, I want to underscore, is already present in Freud’s discussion of resistance in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, most especially in this moment when Freud furnishes the very definition of resistance to analysis as “*whatever interrupts the progress of analytic work*” (SE 5: 517). “Once Freud makes this move,” Rose writes, “once resistance becomes the core of psychoanalysis, everything gets far more difficult. So much so that the difficulty of resistance will in some sense dominate the rest of Freud’s work and life” (LR, 25).

⁹ J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Norton: New York, 1973), 394–395.

¹⁰ See “Freud’s Psychoanalytic Procedure” (1904). It was Rose’s reading of Freud, I should note, that first made me aware of this text.

But it is significant that this definition of “resistance to analysis” comes in Freud’s discussion of the forgetting of dreams and of the doubt a patient often expresses as to whether he or she has correctly reported what happened in a given dream. As Laplanche and Pontalis show, at this stage in Freud’s thinking, Freud sees the source of resistance as linked to the force of repression itself, that is, connected to the force with which what has been repressed, an inadmissible thought that has found expression in distorted form in the dream, is banished as an unpleasurable idea.¹¹ It is ultimately what Freud will call the ego that is the source of this force. The doubt a patient may attach to some portion of his or her account of the dream has to be treated with suspicion in analysis, Freud writes, insofar as it is actually just another kind of censorship, “of resistance to the penetration of the dream-thoughts into consciousness” (SE 5: 516). The answer to the question of what is the source of resistance will, we shall see, be transformed with the introduction of the second topography.

Regardless, though, Freud is clear at this stage that resistance can only be overcome by means of an active, energetic form of intervention that works on and counters resistance, drawing on various forms of insistence and persuasion in order to lead the patient to a new awareness of what had previously been hidden from him or her, “inducing him by human influence...to abandon his resistances,” as Freud will put it

¹¹ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 395.

later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (SE 18: 18). As Derrida glosses it, at this stage, the psychoanalytic approach to resistances is

not a matter of simply and in total neutrality substituting an unveiled truth for what resists it, but rather of leading the patient to awareness [*la prise de conscience*] by actively and energetically using counter-resistances, other antagonistic forces, through an effective intervention in a field of forces... At this point, analysis of a resistance does not consist in a theoretical explanation of the origin and the elements of a defense symptom, but in an unbinding dissolution, an effective practical analysis of the resistance broken down in its force and displaced in its locus—resistance not only comprehended and communicated in its *intelligibility*, but transformed, transposed, transfigured. (R, 17–18)

But if the notion of resistance this suggests—as stubborn struggle against the unconscious, in order to avoid the discomfort of coming into contact with something that has remained hidden—is foundational to psychoanalysis, Derrida suggests, it is not simply because it is present in what Freud has to say at this stage about psychoanalytic technique, but rather because it is in fact already figured in the dream of Irma’s injection with which Freud launches psychoanalysis itself. Such a notion of resistance, for Derrida, is already invoked in Freud’s analysis of this crucial specimen dream—for Lacan, for instance, the one “whose deciphering was inaugural.”¹² Derrida’s reading of Freud in “Resistances” will turn on his reading of the “exemplary example” of the dream of Irma (R, 5).

While elsewhere Derrida’s engagement with Freud tended to focus on Freud’s speculative and marginal analyses, “Resistances” focuses on one of the most

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II, The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1991), 162.

celebrated passages in Freud's work.¹³ There is a certain consistency here, however; Derrida's reading of this passage ultimately centers on an apparently marginal aspect of the text, the "navel of the dream" Freud first describes in a footnote appended to his self-analysis of the dream of Irma's injection. Given that I am trying to analyze Derrida's close reading of Freud (or rather, Derrida's reading of Freud's reading of the dream), I cite Freud's account of the dream in full:

A large hall—numerous guests, whom we were receiving.—Among them was Irma. I at once took her on side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my 'solution' yet. I said to her: 'If you still get pains, it's really only your fault.' She replied: 'If you only knew what pains I've got now in my throat and stomach and abdomen—it's choking me'—and I was alarmed and looked at her. She looked pale and puffy. I thought to myself that after all I must be missing some organic trouble. I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance, like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that.—She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modeled on the turbinal bones of the nose.—I at once called in Dr. M., and he repeated the examination and confirmed it...Dr. M. looked quite different from usual; he was very pale, he walked with a limp and his chin was clean-shaven...My friend Otto was now standing beside her as well, and my friend Leopold was percussing her through her bodice and saying: 'She has a dull area low down on the left.' He also indicated that a portion of the skin on the left shoulder was infiltrated. (I noticed this, just as he did, in spite of her dress.)...M. said: 'There's no doubt it's an infection, but no matter; dysentery will supervene and the toxin will be eliminated.'...We were directly aware, too, of the origin of her infection. Not long before, when she

¹³ Beyond Derrida's treatment of the "Note on the Mystic Pad" in "Freud and the Scene of Writing," the reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* outlined in *The Post Card* (see Chapter 1), and his treatment of *Moses and Monotheism* and Freud's reading of Jensen's *Gradiva* in *Archive Fever* (see Chapter 4), see also his discussion of Freud's "Dreams and Telepathy" (1922) in "Telepathy" and the brief comments on Freud's essay on the uncanny in both "The Double Session" and *Specters of Marx*. See Jacques Derrida, "Telepathy," trans. Nick Royle, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Vol. 1*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 226–261. See also Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 173–286 and Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006).

was feeling unwell, my friend Otto had given her an injection of a preparation of propyl, propyls...propionic acid...trimethylamin (and I saw before me the formula for this printed in heavy type)...Injections of that sort ought not to be made so thoughtlessly...And probably the syringe had not been clean. (SE 4: 107)

Deciphering this dream, which will serve as the crucial example of Freud's discovery in *The Interpretation of Dreams*—namely that dreams have a meaning and that this meaning can be understood, that *a dream is a fulfillment of a wish*—Freud's analysis advances bit by bit. His method is, as Jean Laplanche describes it, “associative-dissociative,” though I cannot treat at length here what exactly Freud means by *Deutung* in this text, the *Traumdeutung*.¹⁴ This associative-dissociative method pursues the associative links between dream elements in order to undo the constructed coherence of the dream, isolating one element at a time. Freud's analysis proceeds, then, from one element to the next. But only up to a point.

This point, the point at which Freud's analysis comes to a halt, for reasons that remain fairly obscure, is what Freud calls “the navel of the dream,” the place where the dream wish originates. Comparing the various women condensed in the figure of Irma, Freud speaks of a premonition that something continues to escape him, which quickly leads him to posit a kind of limit beyond which the interpretation of dreams cannot make any progress:

I had a feeling that the interpretation of this part of the dream was not carried far enough to make it possible to follow the whole of its concealed meaning. If I had pursued my comparison between the three women, it would have

¹⁴ Jean Laplanche, “Psychoanalysis as Anti-hermeneutics,” trans. Luke Thurston, in *Radical Philosophy* 79 (1996): 10.

taken me far afield.—There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown. (SE 4: 111)

Returning to the case of this specimen dream, Derrida will in effect follow Freud up to the point where he left off, at what seems to mark the limit beyond which the dream reaches down in the unknown. There is more than one mention of this navel in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (the other comes much later, in the section on the forgetting of dreams I was just discussing), and we will examine both of these passages in more detail in a moment, but for now, I simply want to call attention to what interests Derrida here.

Underscoring the manner in which the navel of the dream seems to figure an *absolute* limit to the progress of analysis, the question as Derrida pursues it in “Resistances” concerns less what, on the other side of this limit, seems to escape analysis in its absolute unknowability—something that would seem to escape analysis and representation—and more on the nature of this limit. The question Derrida poses, then, is this: “Is this limit of analysis, instead of being the origin of the dream-wish, a resistance to analysis?” (R, 14). One way of reading this is: is “the navel of the dream” the name for *Freud’s* resistance, his resistance to pursuing any further the meaning of the dream? Do we see here Freud’s resistance to the comparison between women he cuts off—somewhat abruptly, one might be forgiven for thinking, saying that it would have taken him “too far afield,” even adding that at this point he would encounter something that is absolutely “unplumbable,” but without entirely saying

why? Is what Freud calls the navel of the dream simply the name for his own resistance, a resistance that remains in place even after all the others that Freud has overcome in the course of his self-analysis have been dissolved, *not* because it is absolutely irreducible but rather because Freud's analysis simply *did not go far enough*? But rather than asking about Freud's own resistance, I think we should read Derrida to be asking whether the navel of the dream is, more generally, something like an *irreducible resistance*, instead of, as Freud seems to want to say, an absolute night that no analysis could hope to shed any light on, a structural limit beyond which analysis simply cannot go. Is this how we should understand what Freud encounters at this moment?

What exactly is at stake in this question and what is at issue in the alternative it seems to present? To put it roughly, the difference between these two alternatives—between the navel as a resistance on the one hand, and the navel as absolute limit on the other—is the difference between two types of analysis: one that conforms to the traditional axiomatics of analysis, and one that seems to put it into question. And so what is at stake here is the specific form of analysis that is psychoanalysis—a decisive trajectory with regards to analysis, marked right from the beginning, in the foundational work of Freudian psychoanalysis. Of the two types of analysis at issue here, Derrida writes:

the distinction between them is like that between, on the one side, an Enlightenment progressivism, which hopes for an analysis that will continue to gain ground on initial obscurity to the degree that it removes resistances and liberates, unbinds, emancipates, as does every analysis, and, on the other

side, a sort of fatalism or pessimism of desire that reckons with a portion of darkness and situates the unanalyzable as its very resource. (R, 16)

Now, one can only imagine—insofar as Derrida does not quite spell them out—the consequences of such an alternative, but chief among them, I would say, would be the absolute originality of Freudian psychoanalysis, the manner in which it proposes a new kind of analysis distinct from the axiomatics of analysis I discussed above: an *a-teleological* notion of analysis. For, in the case of the former, we would have a kind of frustrated teleology that never quite arrives as the end it pursues, but does call into question the pursuit itself. In the case of the latter, what we would have would be a situation in which psychoanalysis somehow *resists* the archeo-eschatological (or more simply, the implicitly teleological) axiomatics of analysis that dictate the return to the most simple and the solution—even if only in this moment in which Freud speaks of the navel of the dream, even if psychoanalysis is not uniform from one end to the other in its resistance to such a notion of analysis.

“Resistances,” to put it simply, demands a reading on this very question: the question remains suspended in the text. But at least initially, we can say that everything Derrida says about the navel of the dream *seems* at first glance to indicate that it is the first of the two alternatives, namely the one whereby the navel of the dream figures a certain resistance, such that Freud remains bound to the archeo-eschatological axiomatics of analysis. This is what Derrida seems to suggest in his reading of Freud’s note on the navel of the dream, insofar as he underscores the manner in which Freud appears to indicate initially that the limit of interpretation is merely provisional.

Freud says not that he could not go any further, but rather that if he had gone further in the comparison between women, it would have led him too far afield. As Derrida notes, this comment raises a whole host of questions that might lead us to think that what we are encountering here is, precisely, Freud's resistance to pursuing this comparison—primarily because Freud does not say why he would have been led astray in the pursuit of this comparison. Derrida writes:

Why would he risk losing his way? Why is he even so sure of this? Why is he so afraid of what he seems so sure? Why would he go astray by comparing the three women? And, above all, what does he know? How can he know that he would go astray where he confesses or claims to confess that he didn't go see, not far enough? (R, 6)

One of the crucial questions that Derrida's reading raises, without entirely pursuing, concerns what exactly it is about these women that seems to provoke this fear of being led astray.¹⁵ For now, I simply want to underscore that if what we are dealing with here is Freud's resistance then it is, again, not that there is a point beyond which analysis cannot go because what it would encounter there is absolutely unknowable *as such*, but rather it is simply that Freud did not go far enough in his analysis, remained blind to his own resistance. But if, beyond the question of Freud's own resistance, this comment seems to indicate that the navel of the dream is something like a resistance and not an absolutely unknown, this is also because the dream itself suggests this understanding of resistance. This notion of resistance is crucial to the interpretation of the dream Freud offers.

¹⁵ I draw here on Shoshana Felman's reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. See Shoshana Felman, *What Does Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 117–119.

Freud ultimately interprets the dream of Irma as a kind of defense, a defense whose “logic” mirrors that of the borrowed kettle joke, as Freud relates:

The whole plea—for the dream was nothing else—reminded one vividly of the defense put forward by the man who was charged by one of his neighbors with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted first, that he had had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed a kettle from his neighbor at all. (SE 4: 119–120)

Freud will read the dream, in other words, as a wish for a reason that would alleviate him of any responsibility for the persistence of Irma’s pains. And this because in the dream, Freud blames Irma for her resistance to the cure, for not having accepted his solution: “*I reproached Irma for not having accepted my solution; I said: ‘If you still get pains, it’s your own fault’*” (SE 4: 108). In the dream, Freud is absolved of any fault: the persistence of Irma’s pains are her own fault, because she did not accept the therapeutic solution offered to her, *and* these pains are really Otto’s fault, the product of the injection of a solution that he had given her, the dream making use of the double resonance of this word “solution.” Analyzing this part of the dream, Freud writes:

I might have said this to her in waking life, and I may actually have done so. It was my view at the time (though I have since recognized it as a wrong one) that my task was fulfilled when I had informed a patient of the hidden meaning of his symptom: I considered that I was not responsible for whether he accepted the solution or not—though this was what success depended on. (SE 4: 108)

Freud may have said this to Irma, in other words, because he made the mistake of thinking that the treatment consists in the simple act of “informing” the patient as to the “hidden meaning” of the symptom, in simply bringing this meaning to light, when

in fact, he now knows, it requires a much more active engagement with everything that might prevent the patient from accepting it. In short, a more active engagement with her or his resistance. Given the understanding of analysis and resistance that dream itself makes use of, Derrida suggests, it is hard not to at least wonder whether what we see at work here is perhaps a resistance, and not, as Freud seems somewhat in a rush to say, something absolutely incommensurable with the meaning and sense of the dream, the meaning of the dream Freud's analysis brings forward in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Even when Freud goes a step further and specifies that at this particular spot his analysis comes up against something absolutely "unplumbable," unknowable and unanalyzable, Derrida is saying, the question of whether this thing resists analysis or whether it is something heterogeneous to it persists. Freud presents us with "an absolute unknown" (R, 10), but he then specifies that this unknown is in fact "the *navel* of the dream": it is the place where the dream first emerged, where it has been birthed we might say, as well as the place (and Derrida emphasizes this resonance) where the dream remains connected, bound, or knotted to the unknown.

Freud does seem to offer us more to go on in the section on the forgetting of dreams, where he mentions the navel again and actually says more about it. At this point in the exposition, Freud is dealing with a series of problems that arise in the interpretation of dreams, and in particular the problem of what Freud calls "over-

interpretation.” In brief, the problem is that even an interpretation that seems complete may not be. That is, “an interpretation which makes sense, is coherent and throws light upon every element of the dream’s content” may not represent the final interpretation, insofar as “the same dream may perhaps have another interpretation as well, an ‘over-interpretation,’ which has escaped him” (SE 5: 524). In a paragraph added in 1919, however, Freud points out that most dreams do not require such “over-interpretation,” nor what Silberer had termed “anagogic” interpretation, interpretation aimed at the fundamental constituents of the dream. This “anagogic” interpretation is said to go beyond the “psycho-analytic” interpretation—which has to do with the psychic meaning of the dream, “usually of an infantile-sexual kind” (SE 5: 524)—to another interpretation of “the more serious thoughts, often of profound import, which the dream-work has taken as its material” (SE 5: 524). As Derrida reads it, this “anagogic interpretation” aims at the “most originary” meaning of the dream and thus concerns “the depth of meaning, the profound seriousness of the thoughts that fill out the dream, the fullness of meaning that the dream takes as its fabric, its text, or its material (*Stoff*)” (R, 12). And Freud rejects this method of interpretation, or more specifically, the necessity of drawing the distinction between these two types of interpretation, writing “the majority of dreams require no ‘over-interpretation’ and, more particularly, are unsusceptible to anagogic interpretation” (SE 5: 524).

Freud then goes a step further: not only are most dreams not susceptible to anagogic analysis, there are even some which cannot be interpreted at all, let alone to their most fundamental material. Not every dream, Freud writes, can be interpreted:

The question whether it is possible to interpret *every* dream must be answered in the negative. It must not be forgotten that in interpreting a dream we are opposed by the psychical forces which were responsible for its distortion. It is thus a question of relative strength whether our intellectual interest, our capacity for self-discipline, our psychological knowledge and our practice in interpreting dreams enable us to master our internal resistances [*Widerstände*]. (SE 5: 524–525)

In essence, Freud presents us with the following: it is not that certain dreams do not have any meaning, it is just that analysis encounters the psychical forces of repression and resistance, and sometimes the analyst has not yet developed countermeasures to overcome them. But then Freud appears to suggest that there is an absolute limit to dream interpretation:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be [*man muss*] left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unraveled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork [*Geflecht*] is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium. (SE 5: 525)

On Derrida's reading, the first sentence poses a limit to interpretation, but in such a way that the nature of this limit remains unclear. In short, the difficulty stems from the ambiguity of the "has to be"—the "one must" (*man muss*)—of "There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which *has to be* left

obscure...” It is a question, for Derrida, whether what is at issue here is, on the one hand, “an unsurpassable limit as a *Factum of Fatum*” or, on the other, “a ‘one must’ of duty that institutes what one *must* do, which is not to go beyond...because that has no meaning” (R, 14). In the case of the former, analysis cannot go further on account of some obstacle, but, Derrida writes, it “*prevents us without prohibiting us* from going beyond; since it concerns an external prevention of some sort, one may assume that there is meaning beyond, that there is sense in going beyond, even if one cannot do it” (R, 14). In the case of the latter, a “structural” limit bars any further progress and it remains uncertain whether there is still sense beyond this limit (R, 14).

But, as I have indicated, Freud gives us a bit more to go on here, insofar as he speaks of the “tangle of dream-thoughts” that emerge at the place of the navel of the dream, the place where the dream-wish grows up out a meshwork of thoughts, like a mushroom, in Freud’s words. For his part, Derrida will retain two elements here. First, the apparent emphasis in Freud’s text on the navel of the dream as a tangle of thoughts, growing up out of a “meshwork” of interwoven threads. This rhetoric seems to situate this meshwork as the final knot that analysis cannot untie (analysis in its etymological sense of as a technique of untying, undoing, unknotting). As Samuel Weber has demonstrated in his reading of the *Geflecht*, strictly speaking, the tangle seems to pose a problem to analysis not because it is the unanalyzable or unknowable *itself*, but because it contains *too many* threads to untangle. On Weber’s reading, the knot “seems curiously full, oversaturated, and if it presents difficulties to our

understanding, it is because it contains too much rather than too little.”¹⁶ But at the same time—this is the second element Derrida wants to stress—there is the now-familiar emphasis on the navel of the dream as connected to the birthplace of the dream, the place where “the dream-wish grows up.”¹⁷ In which case, the place where analysis must come to halt is actually the place where the dream-wish originates, the dream-wish being the very thing analysis here is aimed at uncovering (“*When the work of interpretation has been completed, we perceive that a dream is the fulfillment of a wish*” [SE 4: 121]). In Derrida’s words, “The place of origin of this desire would thus be the very place where the analysis must come to a halt, the place that must be left in obscurity” (R, 15).

In truth, these remarks begin to complicate matters considerably with regard to the question I am pursuing, because these remarks *appear* to suggest that what brings analysis to a halt at this point is not something that is unknowable because it is absolutely heterogeneous to analysis—that is, something completely heterogeneous to all intelligibility, on the other side of a limit beyond which there is the absolute

¹⁶ Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 117. At this point, it seems right to note that all of this close reading is necessary, I think, because the figure of the navel opens up a whole series of suggestions or connotations that exceed its function in the theoretical demonstration Freud is elaborating. As Shoshana Felman writes, “the navel has two important levels of connotation: it functions, on the one hand, *theoretically*, as a new concept forged by Freud in order to denominate, to focalize abstractly, a whole framework of ideas relating to the *dream’s resistance to understanding*. But on the other hand, it functions not abstractly but *concretely* (mobilizing the singularity of an image rather than the generality of a concept) in materially evoking a part of the human body...” Shoshana Felman, *What Does Woman Want?*, 112.

¹⁷ Weber, commenting on this passage, underscores the odd way in which Freud speaks of the navel of the dream in this passage: “Freud does not simply stop at the designation of the dream-navel as the ‘place where (the dream) straddles the unknown’; he *describes* that unknown, or rather, what emerges from it: the dream-wish, surging forth ‘like a mushroom out of its mycelium.’” Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 118–9.

unknown. Rather, they would seem to suggest that analysis encounters here something that is unknowable *but which nevertheless belongs to the very notion of analysis*: namely, a knot of threads to be untied, with the predication that here it is an *originary* knot. What analysis encounters here is the place of origin of the dream-wish, and yet it is precisely at this point that we find a multiplicity of knots that analysis cannot undo.

Analysis here, in other words, would be absolutely unable to analyze the very thing it presupposes as its terminus, the origin of the dream-wish. The thing it aims ultimately to reach would also have to be what always escapes analysis. And so, with regard to the question and the alternative I have been tracking here, if it is a question of whether the navel of the dream names, on the one hand, a resistance or, on the other, an absolute limit, the answer would be—and this is why the question goes unanswered in Derrida’s text—that the alternative itself will not hold. If Derrida does not spell out an answer to the question, if he leaves it suspended, it is because there is a certain undecidability implied in this alternative.

What Derrida demonstrates, even if he does not say it, is that the navel of the dream is something like an irreducible resistance that both belongs to the space of analysis and derails it. The navel of the dream, then, figures the limit to analysis already implied within the very concept of analysis—the irreducible “resistance to analysis” internal to the axiomatics of analysis. What we glimpse with the navel of the dream, Derrida

is saying, is in the end the fact that Freudian analysis—qua analysis—necessarily includes an internal tension, that Freudian psychoanalysis “resists itself” in some sense. But what does this mean with regard to what is at stake in the alternative that is now in question? Derrida had claimed that what is at issue here is whether psychoanalysis conforms to a kind of “Enlightenment progressivism, which hopes for an analysis that will continue to gain ground on initial obscurity” or whether it embodies “a sort of fatalism or pessimism of desire that reckons with a portion of darkness and situates the unanalyzable as its very resource.” At this point, it should be clear that this alternative equally will not hold. Such that what Freud puts to work here, we might now see, is a kind of analysis that reckons with the unknown *insofar as* it works tirelessly to analyze what remains obscure, *insofar as* it adheres to the classical notion of analysis, hyperbolically.

Resistance in Psychoanalysis

Something, a kind of paradox, is broached, then, in Freud’s coming up against the limit figured in the navel of the dream; but it is not—according to the reading of Freud Derrida presents us with in “Resistances”—entirely worked through there. This has to wait, Derrida seems to suggest, though this does not mean the paradox goes away. It persists and troubles how Freud conceives of the task of analysis from that moment on, and it remains just below the surface as Freud’s thinking on resistance changes. After 1920, after Freud has finally come to subscribe to the hypothesis of drive towards death and thus to revise the model of the psyche

psychoanalysis offers, he begins to see that the task of analysis in bringing the unconscious to light is more difficult than he himself initially thought. So much so that by the end of his life, Rose writes, “Freud will talk, not of resistance *to* the unconscious, but resistance *of* the unconscious, as if the unconscious had become active in refusing knowledge of itself” (LR, 29).

Yet in 1920, as we see in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud is not quite there yet. At this stage, stress is placed on the ego as the primary site of resistance, as an agency that takes defensive measures in order to refuse certain unpleasurable thoughts from coming into consciousness, in accordance with the basic principle that what can be pleasurable in one agency (namely, a reduction in excitation) can be experienced as unpleasurable in another. There is no mention of resistance *of* the unconscious at this stage, however. This is particularly clear in Chapter 3, which actually begins with Freud summarizing the development of his thinking on technique and indicating where things stand in psychoanalysis on this matter. “At first,” he says, “the analyzing physician could do no more than discover the unconscious material that was concealed from the patient, put it together, and, at the right moment, communicate it to him. Psycho-analysis was then first and foremost an art of interpreting” (SE 18: 18). Yet this “did not solve the therapeutic problem,” Freud notes, and so very quickly the emphasis came to be on pointing out to the patient where his resistance lies, and “inducing him by human influence” to abandon them (SE 18: 18). But Freud underscores that the ego is the *only site* of resistance:

The unconscious—that is to say, the “repressed”—offers no resistance whatever to the efforts of the treatment. Indeed, it itself has no other endeavor than to break through the pressure weighing down on it and force its way either to consciousness or to discharge through some real action. Resistance during treatment arises from the same higher strata and systems of the mind which originally carried out repression. (SE 18: 19)

Though the “resistance of the unconscious” will ultimately be linked to what Freud is trying to theorize in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—namely, the repetition compulsion and the enigmatic death drive—it will be six more years before Freud begins to speak of this other form of resistance. And even then, this form of resistance will be somewhat difficult to pin down.

We see it emerge, finally, in the addendum to *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety* (1926). This is not yet at the end of Freud’s life, but something in Freud’s thinking on resistance here dictates, from a distance, the pessimism Freud will speak of in a more famous essay from 1937 (one of the last Freud was to write), “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.” Derrida himself does not explicitly connect this prior work to “Analysis Terminable and Interminable”—which is never cited in “Resistances”—but the link is in part, I want to argue, the very thing Derrida’s reading of Freud in this text brings out and allows us to reinterpret. But before Freud begins to reflect on whether the work of analysis might in fact be destined to remain incomplete—because, as we have already begun to see, there may simply be places psychoanalysis cannot penetrate—he catalogs five different types of resistance, only three of which are said to belong to the ego (SE 20: 159–160). Freud is not yet willing to say analysis is interminable, but, as Rose rightly underscores, resistance has multiplied at

this moment in Freud's thinking, as if it can no longer be easily contained (LR, 31). The resistance of repression, transference, and the gain from illness originate in the ego. But there are, beyond these three, two other forms: the resistance Freud associates with the id, a more fundamental resistance he explicitly ascribes to the compulsion to repeat, and a fifth kind, the resistance that comes from the superego and which takes the form of unconscious guilt—the “last resistance” of Rosen's title. In general, Freud writes, “the resistance that has to be overcome in analysis proceeds from the ego...It is hard for the ego to direct its attention to perceptions and ideas which it has up till now made a rule of avoiding, or to acknowledge as belonging to itself impulses that are the complete opposite of those it knows as its own” (SE 20: 159). This type of resistance, he continues, calls for the deployment of certain countermeasures, just as he had suggested in the second passage from *The Interpretation of Dreams* I have just been discussing.

If the resistance is itself unconscious, as so often happens owing to its connection with the repressed material, we make it conscious. If it is conscious, or when it has become conscious, we bring forward logical arguments against it; we promise the ego rewards and advantages if it will give up its resistance. (SE 20: 159)

But there is another resistance that sometimes persists even despite the success of this phase of the analytic work.

It must be that after the ego's resistance has been removed the power of the compulsion to repeat—the attraction exerted by the unconscious prototype upon the repressed instinctual process—has still to be overcome. There is nothing to be said against describing this factor as the *resistance of the unconscious*. (SE 20: 159–160)

The fifth resistance, by contrast, the resistance of the superego, arises out of what Freud identifies as “the sense of guilt or the need for punishment” (SE 20: 160), an unconscious desire for punishment that stands in the way of the path to recovery. This resistance “opposes every move towards success, including, therefore the patient’s own recovery through analysis” (SE 20: 160). The fourth and the fifth resistance are topographically differentiated here, but in another way they are conjoined. The fourth is explicitly bound to the repetition compulsion and the death drive, but the fifth is linked to the death drive in its own way as well. Already in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud theorizes that the power of the superego originates in the destructive aggressivity one turns on oneself. The fourth and the fifth forms of resistance are closely linked, as Rose writes of the superego, in that they “[arise] out of the pleasure the mind takes in thwarting itself” (LR, 31).

We see a shift here in Freud’s thinking: initially, he can only think of resistance as resistance *to* the unconscious, but then, in 1926, he begins to suspect that there might also be a resistance *of* the unconscious, and this other form of resistance will make the task of analysis far more difficult. Ultimately, this resistance will threaten it at every turn. On Derrida’s reading of Freud, I want to suggest, then, what he glimpses early on in the navel of the dream comes to be installed in the repetition compulsion and the enigma of the death drive. What Derrida finds Freud tracing in 1900, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is precisely the paradox whereby the very thing that analysis presupposes as its terminus and aim—the most elementary element, the

origin of the dream-wish—is in some sense what undoes analysis, what causes it founder. And Derrida will see something very similar unfolding in Freud’s thinking on resistance. Because at this moment, Derrida writes, the resistance of the compulsion to repeat comes to be “resistance par excellence”: the most resistant resistance (R, 22). It is the one that remains after all the others have been removed, as Freud describes it. But simultaneously, it emerges as something quite unlike all the other forms of resistance; and crucially, the manner in which it differs from the others dictates that it is *also* “the one that disorganizes the very principle, the constitutive idea of psychoanalysis as analysis of resistances” (R, 22).

To be clear, the issue here is not simply that the resistance Freud associates with the compulsion to repeat is unlike all the others.¹⁸ Rather, it stems from the precise way that this resistance comes to be defined in Freud. Insofar as it figures the death drive at work, Derrida will suggest, the most resistant resistance is also the one that ultimately threatens psychoanalysis itself, that is, as the analysis of resistances. In order to “follow the thread” (as Derrida says) of the strongest resistance, and what is at stake here for Derrida, we need to examine “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” where, I want to suggest, its implications for psychoanalysis as analysis finally begin to register.

¹⁸ Even if there is a multiplicity of resistances, and of different types of resistances, Derrida notes, the concept of resistance remains stable. It is, in this instance, simply the general principle of a series comprised of individual instances: “Its unity of meaning and place, as well as its validity, would even be confirmed by this diffraction: it itself, the same, is what one would find again throughout” (R, 23).

It is as if, on Derrida's reading of Freud, when Freud first articulates the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he cannot yet grasp its consequences, and this must wait until 1937, when the consequences of the shift from thinking only of resistance to the unconscious to speculating on the possibility of resistance of the unconscious become clearer. Thus in focusing on the resistance of the repetition compulsion, Derrida provides us with a new way to read Freud's pessimism in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" regarding psychoanalysis's prospects in the face of resistance. Certainly, it is the obscure resistance that arises from the death drive that Freud cites as the root of the problem in 1937. In 1926, Freud had simply remarked on the fact that the resistance of the id (the resistance of the unconscious) is different in that, unlike the resistances that come from the ego, it requires the strenuous effort of "working through," while the resistance of the superego, the last to be discovered, was simply said to be "the most obscure though not always the least powerful" (SE 20: 160) of the five types he has identified.

By 1937, these resistances begin to appear as the most formidable ones; by this point, this type of resistance is, Rose suggests, "more or less insurmountable" (LR, 31). Here, the resistance of the superego in opposing recovery seems to have become even more focused; Freud begins to speak of it in terms of "a resistance against the uncovering of resistances" (SE 23: 239). And if before it was simply a question of whether or not the analyst had yet developed the appropriate countermeasures to deal with resistance, now resistance seems far more intractable. When confronted with the

resistance of the superego, Freud writes, “we are reminded that analysis can only draw upon definite and limited amounts of energy which have to be measured against hostile forces. And it seems as if victory is in fact as a rule on the side of the big battalions” (SE 23: 240). And yet, the resistance associated with the compulsion to repeat appears here not only as the most powerful, but (reversing the order in which they appeared nine years earlier) also the most obscure, the most unsettling.

Encountering this resistance, Freud continues, “we are dealing with ultimate things” (SE 23: 242). Namely:

the behavior of the two primal instincts, their distribution, mingling and defusion... No stronger impression arises from the resistances during the work of analysis than of there being a force which is defending itself by every possible means against recovery and which is absolutely resolved to hold on to illness and suffering. (SE 23: 242)

This force is made manifest in the sense of guilt and the need for punishment psychoanalysis associates with the agency of the superego, Freud continues, but this is only one portion of it.

If we take into consideration the total picture made up of the phenomena of masochism immanent in so many people, the negative therapeutic reaction and the sense of guilt found in so many neurotics, we shall no longer be able to adhere to the belief that mental events are exclusively governed by the desire for pleasure. These phenomena are unmistakable indications of the presence of a power in mental life which we call the instinct of aggression or of destruction according to its aims, and which we trace back to the original death instinct of living matter. (SE 23: 243)

When faced with this resistance, Freud suggests, analysis runs aground; simply put, “we must bow to the superiority of the forces against which we see our efforts come to nothing” (SE 23: 243).

Freud's tone here is, as Jacqueline Rose points out, uncharacteristically cautious. Resistance is multiplying once again: "his endeavor seems to be coming apart, almost literally, in his hands. Resistance is everywhere, spreading into places he can no longer specify" (LR, 33). Just prior to the passage just cited, she notes, Freud remarks that there are some cases in which the libido is simply too adhesive, and it cannot be detached easily from the objects on which it has become focused. In others, it is simply too mobile, so that even when the analysis succeeds in transferring the libido onto new objects, the results are short-lived. The change that analysis sought to bring about is erased all too easily, so that it is as if the analysis has made no mark on the patient at all. In such cases, Freud writes, "we have an impression, not of having worked in clay, but of having written on water" (SE 23: 241). If the analyst is writing on water, he has the impression that the marks left by the analysis simply are not retained.

At this stage, then, the strongest resistance is also the most obscure. As soon as Freud begins to speak of the resistance of the unconscious and the resistance of the repetition compulsion, resistance spreads itself out, as Rose puts it, into places he can no longer specify. Unlike all the other forms of resistance, the strongest resistance is not interpretable in terms of the avoidance of unpleasure; namely, the unpleasure that would result from the ego coming into contact with "perceptions and ideas which it has up till now made a rule of avoiding." To the contrary, Freud writes in the passage cited above, it suggests that mental events are *not* "exclusively governed by the desire

for pleasure.” When we are confronted with the resistance of the repetition compulsion “we are dealing with ultimate things.” To return to the terms of my reading of the *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in Chapter 1, we are dealing with an unconscious drive towards death.

Autoimmunity, Death Drive

As I indicated in Chapter 1, in 1920 Freud begins to ascribe greater significance to the recurrence of experiences of trauma and unpleasure, and sets out to revise his model of the psyche dominated by the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of unpleasure in order to account for it. Because Freud sees in this a repetition that brings with it no possibility of pleasure, the prospect of an unconscious compulsion to repeat leads him to speculate that there must be a psychic force operative “beyond the pleasure principle.” The repetition compulsion, which appears to Freud to “exhibit to a high degree an instinctual character” (SE 18: 35), seems to him to indicate the presence of another drive at work in the psyche. In the text of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud ultimately gives this force the name *Todestrieb*, death drive: he envisions this drive as a tendency to reduce excitation within the psychic apparatus even further than the level sought by the pleasure principle, in fact seeking to reduce it to absolute zero, a state Freud associates with what he describes as the state of inorganic quiescence.

This leads Freud to posit that there must be two groups of drives operative in the psyche: the death drive, which pursues the path to death in seeking to dissolve and extinguish all excitation in the living organism, and the life drives, which seek to prolong life by binding organic matter together into ever greater unities that could continue to persist. But the regressive character of the compulsion to repeat—continually bringing one back to a past traumas, reopening old wounds, as it were—obliges Freud to see the death drive as a tendency that seeks a return to a *prior* state, “an initial state from which the living entity has at once time or other departed and to which it is striving to return” (SE 18: 38). The death drive, then, Freud suggests, seeks a return to an original inanimate state that must have preceded life. The death drive continually seeks to bring the organism back to death.

The repetition compulsion and the death drive, Freud suggests, do not pertain to the “secondary” processes of mental functioning associated with waking consciousness, but rather belong solely to the primary, “purely instinctual” (SE 18: 39) process of the unconscious. The drives, even if they appear to have some somatic origin, Freud theorized in the essay on “Repression” (1915), only find expression in psychic life via a representative, *Triebrepräsenz*—as Teresa de Lauretis underscores in her treatment of the question whether the drive is somatic or psychical in origin, a “representative” not in the sense of a direct translation, but in the sense of a delegate: “The drive as such has no direct expression: it reaches the mind only through a

process of delegation” (FD, 61).¹⁹ But the death drive, Freud later seems to suggest, has no psychical representatives. While it is perpetually in conflict with Eros or the life drives, it always “work[s] essentially in silence” (SE 18: 258), as Freud put it three years after the first articulation of the death drive, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929). In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, reflecting back on how he first advanced the hypothesis of the death drive, Freud notes that the assumption in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was that “the death instinct operated silently within the organism towards its dissolution” (SE 21: 119). It may make itself manifest when it becomes alloyed with Eros in the form of an instinct of aggressiveness or destructiveness directed towards the external world, but it itself is entirely imperceptible, Freud suggests.

As Derrida himself reads this comment several years later in *Archive Fever* (1996), the death drive is “mute” (Derrida’s rendering of Freud’s *stumm*): “It is at work, but since it always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own” (AF, 10). The death or destruction drive destroys even its own traces. It works even, or perhaps primarily, Derrida suggests, to efface every trace of itself:

It destroys in advance its own archive, as if that were in truth the very motivation of its most proper movement. It works *to destroy the archive: on the condition of effacing* but also *with a view to effacing* its own “proper” traces... It will always have been archive-destroying, by silent vocation. (AF, 10)

¹⁹ I draw here as well on Laplanche and Pontalis’s discussion of the term “instinctual representative.” Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, 223.

The strongest resistance Freud identifies, then, arises from a drive that operates in absolute silence and seeks only destruction. Whereas the life drives seek to prolong life by binding entities together—“to form living substance into ever greater unities” (SE 18: 258), from the basic units of organic matter to the social unit—the dissociative force of the death drive seeks only to undo and unbind. As such, the resistance of the repetition compulsion is, for Derrida, a resistance “that *has no meaning*” (R, 23).

But beyond the fact that the strongest resistance is one that has no meaning, there is another reason why for Derrida the resistance of the repetition compulsion is “the one that disorganizes the very principle, the constitutive idea of psychoanalysis as analysis of resistances” (R, 22). Simply put, the issue is that, as Derrida reads it, the repetition compulsion is not a resistance. “I would say that what resists at this point is a nonresistance,” Derrida writes (R, 23). The repetition compulsion is a nonresistance in the sense that it is not opposed to analysis, insofar as it is itself of an analytic character—“regressive, dissociative, asocial, and unbinding...” (R, 23).

This compulsion combines the two essential motifs of all *analysis*, the regressive or archeotropic movement and the movement of dissolution that urges toward destruction, that loves to destroy by dissociating—which is why a moment ago I called it *philolytic*. The repetition compulsion does not give its meaning to the four other forms of resistance for two reasons: it has no meaning (death drive) and it resists analysis in the form of nonresistance, for the primary reason that it is *itself of an analytic structure or vocation*. (R, 23–24)

The repetition compulsion, in short, does not resist analysis in the same way as the other resistances. It does not oppose the work of analysis in the form of an

antagonistic force. Rather, it is analytic through and through. We see here, again, the paradox we encountered in the navel of the dream: as I have suggested, on Derrida's reading of Freud, something is broached in 1900 in Freud's encounter with the navel of the dream and then comes to be installed in the enigmatic concept of the death drive. By the time of "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Derrida is suggesting, resistance par excellence—the paradigmatic resistance, Derrida would say—is also the very one that psychoanalysis, as the analysis of resistances, cannot ever touch. The very thing that psychoanalysis qua analysis presupposes, resistance, is also what dictates that psychoanalysis can never come to an end, that something always escapes analysis; it is the very thing in the face of which psychoanalysis founders. And this not because it is absolutely heterogeneous to the space of analysis, but because it belongs so thoroughly to it, insisting, as it were, on endless dissociation, undoing, and unbinding.

Thus, immediately after the passage just cited, Derrida writes, "We have returned here very close to the navel of the dream, to the place where the desire for death and desire *tout court* call for and speak the analysis they prohibit..." (R, 24). If the resistance of the repetition compulsion undoes psychoanalysis as the analysis of resistances, this means for Derrida that psychoanalysis, in some sense, *resists itself*. What Derrida sees at work here is the "Resistance of psychoanalysis—to psychoanalysis" (R, 24).

With the notion of the repetition compulsion, psychoanalysis resists—despite itself, Derrida seems to want to say—the axiomatics of analysis to which it conforms. In other words, there is an interminable resistance to analysis at work in the particular way psychoanalysis adheres to the traditional axiomatics of analysis, hyperbolically, analyzing up to the very point at which the task of analysis itself is threatened. If psychoanalysis manages to resist the traditional concept of analysis, Derrida is suggesting, it is not because Freud invented a new concept of analysis:

Under the old name, the paleonym “analysis,” Freud did not introduce or invent a new concept, supposing that such a thing ever exists. Who, besides God, has ever *created*, literally “created,” a concept? Freud had no choice, if he wished to make himself understood, but to inherit from tradition. (R, 19)

Rather, it is on account of the particular way Freud adheres to the traditional concept of analysis. Ten years later, in a dialogue with Elisabeth Roudinesco, Derrida gives us a clue as to what he is describing here in “Resistances.” “I prefer in Freud the partial, regional, and minor analyses, the most venturesome soundings,” he says,

These breaches and openings sometimes reorganize, at least virtually, the entire field of knowledge. It is necessary, as always, to be ready to give oneself over to them, and to be able to give them back their revolutionary force. An invincible force. Finally, whatever the inequalities of development, the “scientific” incompleteness, the philosophical presuppositions, this force always involves the reaffirmation of a reason “without alibi,” whether theological or metaphysical. This reaffirmation of reason can go against a certain state or a certain historical concept of reason... (FWT, 173)

The “revolutionary force” of Freud’s analyses for Derrida is linked here, again, not to the fact that Freud inaugurated an entirely new concept of reason, but rather to the particular way that he adheres to the traditional one. On this view, then, what is revolutionary in Freud would be the way he seems to carry the notion of analysis and

the work of analysis as far as they can go, to the very point at which they falter; out of a faith in reason itself, at the expense of a theological or metaphysical understanding of the subject and of the world, at the expense of any theological or metaphysical “alibi” as Derrida puts it. What Derrida sees in Freud here, in psychoanalysis’s resistance to psychoanalysis, is a form of what he calls “autoimmunity.”

Derrida references the notion of an “autoimmune” resistance in the preface to *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* (written for the publication of *Resistances* five years later). Commenting on the title of the collection, what he chooses to emphasize in his work on psychoanalysis, he writes, is not the external resistances *to* psychoanalysis, but rather another resistance:

Installed right away at the origin, like an auto-immune process, at the heart of psychoanalysis and already within the Freudian concept of “resistance-to-analysis”: a resistance *of* psychoanalysis as we know it, a resistance to itself, in sum, which is just as inventive as the other. (R, viii)

What Derrida calls the resistance of psychoanalysis to itself in the text of “Resistances,” then, would seem to be a form of what, in the years after he first offered the reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams* outlined in “Resistances”—namely, in *Specters of Marx* from 1993 and “Faith and Knowledge” from 1995—Derrida began to call “autoimmunity,” borrowing a term from the language of the life sciences. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida theorizes autoimmunity in terms of the relation between life and death. There, Derrida writes, “life does not go without death, and that death is not beyond, outside of life, unless one inscribes the beyond in

the inside, in the essence of the living... The living ego is autoimmune.”²⁰ “To protect its life,” he continues,

to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within (so many figures of death: differance of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language)... (SM, 177)

Derrida defined this term more concretely in an interview conducted in the wake of September 11th, 2001: “As we know, an autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity.”²¹ Again, as in the passage from *Specters of Marx*, what is at stake is a process that threatens the life of a living being, but here it is a bit clearer, I think, how Derrida is borrowing from the life sciences. When, in the body, an autoimmune response is triggered, defenses are turned back on what they are meant to protect, a process that can be potentially ruinous.

The term autoimmunity, then, as Derrida uses it refers to the way something is threatened not from the outside, but from within. Martin Hägglund, who situates the logic of autoimmunity at the center of Derrida’s work in his recent book on Derrida’s radical atheism, puts it this way: “[Derrida’s] notion of autoimmunity spells out that

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 176–177. It was Martin Hägglund’s reading of Derrida that first brought this passage to my attention. See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 14.

²¹ Jacques Derrida and Giovanna Borradori, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides—A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 94.

everything is threatened from within itself.”²² But if an autoimmune process is threatening, it also, as Derrida suggests in the passage from *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* cited above, opens up the possibility of change, a feature of the notion of autoimmunity that Michael Naas has aptly brought out.²³ In short, it opens psychoanalysis up to transformation. Speaking of the resistance of psychoanalysis, Derrida says that it “[comes] to the aid of psychoanalysis despite itself” (R, viii).

Yet the logic of autoimmunity does not only offer a way of thinking through the implications for psychoanalysis of Freud’s theory of the death drive. It equally offers a way of thinking the death drive from the perspective of deconstruction. This is, I think, ultimately what emerges from Derrida’s treatment of Foucault in “To Do Justice to Freud” (a lecture delivered just after “Resistances” in November 1991), where Derrida speaks of the death drive in a way that prefigures how he will describe the autoimmunity of life in *Specters of Marx*. In “To Do Justice to Freud,” Derrida picks up on an ambivalence in Foucault whereby sometimes Foucault seems to want to give credit to Freud for resisting a new form of power that emerges with psychiatry and the study of sexuality, and sometimes he wants to discredit the “evil genius” Freud who appears, ultimately, as the most effective and the most convincing purveyor of the dominant discourse on madness and on sex and pleasure. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault refers, tendentiously, to the “good genius” Freud who

²² Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 9.

²³ Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 123–124.

formalizes a theory of sexuality that ultimately serves what he will call biopower, and thus this Freud is for Foucault an evil genius (Derrida consistently refers to this “evil genius” Freud we find in *The History of Sexuality*, thereby gesturing towards his famous critique of Foucault’s reading of Descartes in *Madness and Civilization*; what was at issue in Derrida’s critique of Foucault was whether Descartes excludes madness from the order of reason in precisely the passage in the *Meditations* where Descartes postulates the existence of a transcendent evil genius that deceives us).²⁴

Derrida, taking issue with Foucault’s treatment of Freud, clearly suggests in “To Do Justice” that Foucault was not entirely fair to Freud: he was not entirely fair to him in never having complicated his understanding of the Freudian project, and most especially, Derrida suggests, Freud’s thinking on the death drive. Because it is precisely there, in the theory of the death drive of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida argues, that Freud rethinks the notion of pleasure and its relation to power or mastery, to what Freud understood sometimes in terms of a fundamental aggressivity he associates with the death drive and sometimes in terms of a drive for power or mastery.²⁵ At the very least, Derrida says at the close of the text, Foucault, who will

²⁴ See Derrida’s critique of Foucault, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 31–63. This essay provoked a pointed response from Foucault. See Michel Foucault, “This Body, This Paper, This Fire,” trans. Geoffrey Bennington, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 393–418.

²⁵ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Derrida writes, “not only opens up the horizon of a beyond of the pleasure principle (the hypothesis of such a beyond never really seeming to be of interest to Foucault) against which the whole economy of pleasure needs to be rethought, complicated, pursued in its most unrecognizable ruses and detours... [This] text also problematizes, in its greatest radicality, the agency of power and mastery” (TDJ, 116).

see the invention of pleasure as intertwined with power, missed an opportunity here (“the hypothesis of [a beyond of the pleasure principle] never really seeming to be of interest to Foucault” (TDJ, 116), Derrida notes, sounding somewhat disappointed): he missed an opportunity insofar as he might have found the resources for this own project already in Freud, Derrida says.

Coming to terms with Freud, Derrida continues, would mean listening to Freud, and in particular listening to everything in Freud that suggests that pleasure—the pleasure principle—is intertwined with the death drive and aggressivity, and with the pursuit of power or mastery. Raising a number of questions of Foucault, Derrida ultimately concludes that perhaps “what one must stop believing in is the principality or principleness, in the problematic of the principle...or of some drive that is thought to be more originary than the other” (TDJ, 117). Because, Derrida asks,

Is not what Freud was looking for, under the names “death drive” and “repetition compulsion,” that which, coming “before” the principle (of pleasure or reality), would remain forever heterogeneous to the principle of the principle?... is not the duality in question, this spiraled duality, what Freud tried to oppose to all monisms by speaking of a dual drive and of a death drive, of a death drive that was no doubt not alien to the drive for mastery? And, thus, to what is most alive in life.... (TDJ, 117–118)

Thus, for Derrida, what Freud advances in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is precisely the notion that, as he put it *Specters of Marx*, death is not beyond, outside of life, but inscribed in life, “in the essence of the living.” What Freud tries to think under the heading of “the death drive,” it would seem, is what Derrida would go on to call the “autoimmune” process at the heart of life.

The logic of autoimmunity traced here thus offers another way of approaching what Derrida had earlier in “To Speculate” called “life death,”²⁶ but one that fleshes out what is at stake in this notion.²⁷ What Freud outlines, on this reading—even if he continually tries, classical theoretician that he is, according to Derrida²⁸, to track down some other self-standing principle, entity, or tendency beyond the pleasure principle (this failure actually constituting his success, from a Derridean standpoint, I think)—is the enigma of a drive towards death that is not opposed to life from some place beyond or outside of it. It is not opposed to life because it is in fact indissociable from life, internal to it. Indeed, the “impossible logic,” as Derrida put it in the crucial reading of Freud outlined in “To Speculate,” of a death drive internal to life is, for Derrida, is on display in Freud’s texts on resistance. On this view, when, in the last ten years of his life, Freud begins to speak about coming up against the death drive in analysis, he is speaking about the way *the psyche undermines itself*. He seems to be speaking about the way psychic life is continually disturbed from within.

²⁶ See Chapter 1, pages 39–41.

²⁷ Although I cannot develop the connection here, there is even a suggestive passage in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” that seems to indicate that Derrida is already starting to link Freud and the logic of autoimmunity in this text. Moving quickly through a series of propositions that he suggests follow from the reading of Freud’s “Mystic Pad” he has just outlined, Derrida turns his attention to what Freud says about the protective function of the uppermost layer of the writing pad. Without this layer, Freud indicates, the waxed surface beneath would be ripped and permanently damaged. And thus, what we ought to take from this, Derrida suggests, is that “There is no writing which does not devise some means of protection, *to protect against itself*, against the writing by which the ‘subject’ is himself threatened as he lets himself be written: *as he exposes himself*.” Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 224. I would like to thank Geoffrey Bennington for bringing this passage to my attention.

²⁸ As Derrida puts it in *Archive Fever* (1994), Freud never shakes his role as “classical metaphysician and as positivist *Aufklärer*...” Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 94.

This is precisely what Jacqueline Rose's reading of Freud brings out, I would submit. The most deadly resistance, Rose suggests in her reading of Freud, is the resistance that "arises out of the pleasure the mind takes in thwarting itself" (LR, 31). If there is a resistance *of* the unconscious that manifests itself in a crushing compulsion to repeat, then, in its very functioning, the psychic apparatus perpetually disrupts itself, turns back on itself in a "quasi-suicidal fashion" as Derrida would have it.

Thinking the death drive in terms of the logic of autoimmunity, there are not two opposed tendencies at work here, there is not a dualism of life and death drives. Rather, there is only life, but this life is internally divided. As Derrida writes in "Resistances," the very notion of an autoimmune process presupposes a kind of internal tension, but "[since] a purely internal tension is impossible, it is a matter of an absolute inherence of the other or the outside at the heart of the internal" (R, 26). For Derrida, what Freud glimpsed in his speculations on the death drive and the insurmountable resistance one encounters when face to face with the compulsion to repeat, then, is the inherence of a kind of "death" in the very heart of the living, in the very life of the psyche.²⁹ This is what Derrida finds in Freud, I would say. It is, for Derrida, what we have to reckon with in the encounter with Freud's evil or good genius. But, resisting Freud, and what might very well appear to be a genuine ambivalence in Freud's writings on life and death, and on resistance, with regard to

²⁹ I draw on here, and attempt to build on, work done by Geoffrey Bennington on the notion of "life death" as it appears in Derrida's work. See Geoffrey Bennington, *Not Half No End: Militantly Melancholy Essays in Memory of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 58–59.

such a notion of life, Derrida suggests at the same time that Freud himself never manages to think through its consequences: it gives rise, rather, to “a resistance of psychoanalysis to itself.”

Chapter 4:

Ethics and the Deconstruction of the Law: Derrida and Lacan

Derrida's dealings with psychoanalysis, I have suggested, were never simple. His relationship to psychoanalysis was, from the beginning, always complicated. There is a marked consistency in Derrida's work on psychoanalysis, however: from one end to the other, from his early writings on psychoanalysis right up through his last "return" to Freud, he is wrestling with the difficult issues raised by the concept of the death drive. This consistency, though, has only recently come to light. In the writings from the last ten years of his life, Derrida turned his attention to the problematic of ethics and law in Freud's thinking, and it is only with the arrival of a text from 2000, "Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul," that we begin to see that even in this last phase, the death drive remains at the center of Derrida's engagement with Freud. In this period of his work, Derrida increasingly came to focus on Freud's late "sociological" works—major texts such as *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), as well as Freud's writing on war and aggression—in which Freud begins to grapple with the profound implications of what he formulated in the early 1920s. I am referring here, of course, to the turn taken in 1920 with the theory of the drives advanced in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but also to the introduction of the second topography in *The Ego and the Id* in 1923, where Freud begins to develop the notion of a moral agency inside the mind, the

agency of the superego. Indeed, the two should be seen as intimately connected: as I suggest in what follows, the notion of a severe moral conscience (the superego) is from the beginning linked, in Freud's thinking, to the aggressive, destructive force he calls the death drive. The late "sociological" works represent, in part, an attempt to flesh out and work through the implications of this line of thinking.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud had envisioned the death drive as a tendency that opposes the efforts of the life drives to construct ever greater unities, at the level of organic matter all the way up to the level of the social unit—and in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud developed this notion further, suggesting that in the sphere of human relations the death or destruction drive, as he calls it at times (SE 21: 119), takes the form of a fundamental, ineradicable aggressivity. This aggressivity, Freud theorizes, is in fact essential to the very formation of culture, the very formation of "civilization." The moral law of civilization—its prohibition or injunction—he begins to suspect, has its origins not in some higher function in human beings but rather in the aggression "man" turns back on himself. This process is at the center of the account Freud provides of the origins of civilization, the famous myth of the primal horde and the murder of the primal father Freud outlines in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (returning to an account first offered in *Totem and Taboo* [1913]). What we see Freud grappling with in his account of the origins of civilization, then, is the notion of an intimate relation between the moral law that defines civilization and "transgressive" violence.

The problematic of law and violence in Freud's thinking emerges in Derrida's later work as a critical point of interest for deconstruction, at a moment when Derrida's work began explicitly to take up questions of law and justice. These questions came to be linked, in Derrida's work during this period, with a particular approach to ethics. What I want to explore in this chapter is the connection between Freud's thinking on law and violence and Derrida's own approach to the question of a violence integral to the law itself in *Archive Fever* (1994) and his important earlier essay "Force of Law" (1990). This will lead me, in turn, to Derrida's thinking on ethics—a thinking that we see Derrida articulating explicitly with reference to Freud; to Freud's theory of the death drive, but equally what Derrida seems to want to call Freud's ethics.

In what follows, I attempt to read Derrida's work in this area alongside the work of Jacques Lacan. Though Derrida did not, to my knowledge, comment on it, Lacan, for his own part, explored the ethical dimension of Freud's thinking, and the ethics of psychoanalysis as a practice, explicitly in Seminar VII. While Seminar VII continues to receive considerable attention in contemporary work on Lacan¹, it has not been

¹ See Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real* (New York: Verso, 2000), Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), and Slavoj Žižek, Eric Santner and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). More recent examples include Charles Shepherdson's *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008) and Stefania Pandolofò essay "Soul Choking": Maladies of the Soul, Islam, and the Ethics of Psychoanalysis" in *Umbr(a)*'s special issue on Islam (2009), 71–104.

considered in relation to the so-called turn to ethics in Derrida's work.² This seems to me a missed opportunity. Lacan's approach to the problematic of ethics in Freud sheds light, I would say, on what Freud's thinking implies as to any possible ethics, and this is, as I will show, a key question for Derrida in his later work on Freud. While, in the end, Derrida sets out to differentiate his own thinking from Freud's, a reading of Lacan suggests that perhaps we ought to think this relation another way. What Lacan shows, I will suggest, is that Freud's thought points to an "ethics of psychoanalysis" that consists in a kind of continual negotiation that takes place in the absence of any certain idea of the good; it thus entails something akin to the "undecidability" Derrida sees at stake in every ethical intervention. Lacan's approach helps bring into focus, I want to argue, the question we find Derrida exploring in his later work: the question of ethics after Freud.

Derrida's Theses on Freud

As I have indicated, the problematic of law and violence in Freud's thinking emerges in Derrida's later work as a critical point of interest for deconstruction. We see this happening in a major text on Freud from the mid-1990s, *Archive Fever*.³ In this text, Derrida in effect returns to the metaphor of writing and inscription in Freud's work

² I say "so-called" here because in recent years some scholars have begun to show, persuasively in my opinion, to challenge the view, held by Simon Critchley for instance, that Derrida's work from "Force of Law" on reveals a certain "ethical motivation" that is altogether absent in the earlier work. See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) and Samir Hadad, "A Genealogy of Violence, from Light to the Autoimmune," *diacritics* 38.1–2 (2008), 121–142.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

and the problematic of the memory trace he first took up in “Freud and the Scene of Writing.” In *Archive Fever*, he revisits what he advanced in that earlier text with regard to Freud’s challenge to traditional notions of consciousness and self-presence. Freud undermines the very notion of self-presence, Derrida had said, with the notion of the unconscious memory trace; the memory trace impinges on consciousness, it impinges on the lived present, even though, having been from the beginning unconscious, it is a trace which “has never been *perceived*, whose meaning has never been lived in the present.”⁴ In *Archive Fever*, once again focusing on Freud’s thinking on memory, Derrida suggests psychoanalysis can be understood as a “science of the archive,” whereby we could envision the psychic apparatus retaining memory traces in a type of psychic archive. Echoing the argument of “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida will claim that what is at stake in psychoanalysis is, precisely, a deconstruction of the concept of the archive, to the extent that this term invokes the idea that what has been preserved is secure and amenable to a process of simple recollection. But even as Freud’s thinking contests this notion of the archive, Derrida argues, it remains bound to it. Freud seems at times to still think, despite what his own theory suggests, that he might be able to fully reconstruct what lies buried in the unconscious. For Derrida, Freud’s discourse on the archive, like his discourse in general, is divided: it challenges the traditional concept of the archive, but it also repeats it.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 214.

This is what Derrida tries to illustrate in *Archive Fever* with three “theses” on Freud, or rather, on the Freudian concept of the archive. Now, the first two concern aspects of Freud’s thinking we see Derrida treating in earlier texts—namely, Freud’s discourse on memory and inscription and the speculative project of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—but the third thesis concerns Freud’s thinking on the origins of civilization and the incest prohibition. What we find in Freud, Derrida writes, is something like a deconstruction of the “nomological” principle of the archive. That is, one of the *two principles* constitutive of the concept, for Derrida; the two principles announced in the Greek word *arkhe*. On the one hand, the word invokes the *arkhe* “in the *physical, historical, or ontological* sense” (AF, 2): the origin, the principal element, what is located at the very beginning. On the other, the word refers to the *arkhe* “in the *nomological* sense, to the *arkhe* of the commandment” (AF, 2): what is at stake here is a certain authority. The *arkheion*, Derrida notes, is the residence of a magistrate, one of the *archons*, those who make and represent the law, and thus the place where legal documents are deposited and safeguarded (AF, 2).⁵

The double resonance of the *arkhe* bespeaks, in the concept of the archive, a double function, according to Derrida:

every archive, we will draw some inferences from this, is at once *institutive* and *conservative*. Revolutionary and traditional. An *eco-nomic* archive in this double sense: it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making the law (*nomos*) or in making people respect

⁵ Already in the essay on “*Différance*” (1968), deconstruction was said to put into question the principle of the *arkhe* and its dual function. “[There] is nowhere to *begin* to trace the sheaf or the graphics of *différance*. For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility. The problematic of writing is opened by putting into question the value *arkhe*,” Derrida writes there. Jacques Derrida, “*Différance*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

the law. A moment ago we called it nomological. It has the force of law... (AF, 7)

The third thesis on Freud, then, concerns the manner in which Freud analyzes the source of just this authority to found and preserve the law. “*On the one hand,*”

Derrida writes,

no one has illuminated better than Freud what we have called the archontic principle of the archive, which in itself presupposes not the originary *arkhe* but the nomological *arkhe* of the law... No one has analyzed, that is also to say, deconstructed, the authority of the archontic principle better than he. No one has shown how this archontic, that is, paternal and patriarchic, principle only posited itself to repeat itself and returned to re-posit itself only in parricide. It amounts to repressed or suppressed parricide, in the name of the father as dead father. (AF, 95)

What Derrida has in mind here is Freud’s account of the myth of the primal horde in *Civilization and Its Discontents* and the account of the origins of Judaism of *Moses and Monotheism* at the center of *Archive Fever* (*Archive Fever* is a mediation on Freud and the concept of the archive, but it is also a pointed response to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s reading of this text).⁶ Derrida is underscoring here that what Freud analyzes in these texts is the emergence of civilization and also the emergence of patriarchy in the rules that govern lineage and kinship ties. The reference to parricide and the “dead father” invokes how, in these texts, Freud sees the emergence of civilization as bound to the murder of a primal father, whether that be the mythic primal father or Moses, the father of Judaism.

⁶ See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

But, *on the other hand*, Derrida continues, “in his life as in his works, in his theoretical theses as in the compulsion of his institutionalizing strategy, Freud repeated the patriarchal logic” (AF, 95). In this way, Derrida seems to be suggesting, Freud did not fully think through what his own thinking dictates. The Freudian project, then, like Freud’s discourse on the archive, is, again, divided: it bears a kind of contradiction within. Even so, it is hard, I think, not to hear in this passage an echo of Derrida’s own deconstruction of the law—of the instituting violence that founds the law—in the seminal essay “Force of Law.” Part of what I want to explore in this chapter is the connection between Freud’s thinking on this issue and Derrida’s own approach to the question of a violence integral to the law itself in this text.

Freud’s Moses

In the passage from *Archive Fever* I have been discussing here, Derrida reads Freud’s late work as a kind of “deconstruction” of the authority of the “archontic” principle of the archive, and thus a kind of deconstruction of the authority of the law itself. As I have indicated, Derrida seems to have in mind here both Freud’s account of the origins of the incest prohibition and civilization of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) and the account of the origins of Judaism that is at stake in Derrida’s response to Yerushalmi. Freud’s account of the emergence of the incest taboo in *Totem and Taboo* is well known, and it is the one Freud returns to *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In an attempt to envision the origins of civilization—the very condition

of which is the renunciation of instinct, Freud surmises—Freud speculates that in the case of the primal horde, the sons of the primal father must have banded together to murder him, and out of the ensuing guilt, instituted his prohibition, initially in the form of a totem (SE 21: 131–133). The force of the prohibition, for Freud, originates in this sense of guilt, and thus the power retroactively bestowed on the figure or memory, the ghost, of the father *after* his death.⁷ In this way, the law of the incest prohibition, the founding law of “civilization” itself, “amounts to repressed or suppressed parricide” as Derrida puts it. The preservation of the law here is, in each instance, a repetition propelled by guilt, and by extension, a repetition of the original transgression. Despite appearances, then, the injunction and the form of transgression it prohibits are, on this view, intimately bound up with one another.

But this is equally what Derrida’s reading of *Moses and Monotheism* attempts to bring out, the “deconstruction” of the authority of the archontic principle Derrida references above. Because Freud’s project in this, one of his most speculative works (in the dialogue with Roudinesco, Derrida speaks of having been drawn to Freud’s speculative works)⁸, is precisely to show that Moses, the patriarch of the Jewish religion and “the lawgiver of the Jewish people” (SE 23: 17), was in fact an Egyptian; and thus the spiritual “abstraction” of monotheism, with its ban on images of its one

⁷ As Derrida writes in *The Politics of Friendship*, from the same period as *Archive Fever*, this account “must indeed *presuppose* moral (egalitarian and universalist) law to explain the shame and remorse which, according to Freud, would have ensued in the wake of the crime, and then—and *only* then, have grounded egalitarian law *qua* the interdict of killing.” Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), 279.

⁸ See Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow...: A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 172.

God, emerged from Egyptian polytheism, though not without having been marked by a certain violence. Drawing on historical, philological, and archaeological studies on what amounts to a reconstructed prehistory, Freud's speculative "historical novel," as Derrida calls it, is to my mind one of the most difficult texts to track of Freud's works. Nevertheless, I will try to provide an overview.

The religion of Moses the Egyptian, Freud hypothesizes, was originally distinct from the religion of the god Jahweh that was ultimately adopted as the religion of the Jewish people; there were in fact, then, two "Moseses," each one associated with two different religions. The second religion, however, was animistic and the god Jahweh likely simply the most important of many gods, according to Freud. Thus he is left with the question of what accounts for the form of the myth that would, in effect, fuse the image of the two Moseses. Analyzing the foundational narratives of Judaism the way he analyzes the dream, Freud suggests that they arise from the necessity of a distortion, one that would seek to disguise the initial *rejection* of "a rigid monotheism on the grand scale" that actually took place, the rejection carried out by the followers of the Egyptian Moses sometime after their departure from Egypt (SE 23: 18). But the extraordinary force of the distortion that Freud sees at work in the historical narrative attests, he suggests, to the traumatic force of the rejection it seeks to cover over. The initial rejection of monotheism, as Freud imagines it, then, must have been violent; the followers of the Egyptian Moses must have in fact carried out the murder of this Moses who had previously been their liberator. For Freud, the manner in

which another, later generation would take on a strict monotheism, and with it the unyielding demands of Mosaic law—including even a prohibition on images of this singular god, which seems to Freud to mark a powerful disavowal of the baroque Egyptian polytheism out of which monotheism itself emerges—serves to disguise this originary violence, even as it simultaneously bears witness to it in the very form of the distortion.

If Freud “deconstructs” the authority of Mosaic law, then, it is for Derrida not so much because of what it suggests about the actual, historical origins of Judaism as opposed to the myth of its origins, but rather because of the way in which Freud thinks the structure of the law here: namely, the way in which the founding of the law necessarily and originally entails a repression. The repression of a violence that is the very condition of the law itself, and which it thus shelters within itself. The law here cannot be understood any longer as a simple given; rather, Freud shows that it cannot constitute itself without repressing something. This is in the end, I think, the “undeniable truth” (AF, 78) of Freud’s book on Moses for Derrida, the one that attests—beyond what Derrida explores in *Archive Fever* with regard to the problematic of “impression” (*Niederschrift*), imprint, or inscription in Freud’s work, and the impression left by Freud on the institution of psychoanalysis—to the “Freudian impression” left on Derrida.

Commenting on his turn to the word impression, Derrida speaks of the manner in which it invokes the terms repression and suppression, or rather, the distinction between the two, initially drawn in the essay on “The Unconscious” (1915), implied in the model of the Mystic Pad that had occupied Derrida’s interest in “Freud and the Scene of Writing”:

Unlike repression (*Verdrangung*), which remains unconscious in its operation and in its result, suppression (*Unterdrückung*) effects what Freud calls a ‘second censorship’—between the conscious and the preconscious—or rather affects the affect, which is to say, that which *can never* be repressed in the unconscious but only suppressed and displaced in another affect. (AF, 28)

This distinction will prove crucial in *Archive Fever*; it will reappear at a critical point in Derrida’s reading of Yerushalmi, precisely at the point that Derrida will underscore the manner in which what Yerushalmi’s critique of *Moses and Monotheism* cannot think is the possibility of a violence or a murderous desire whose trace, whose memory, is repressed, and thereby *preserved in its very effacement*. Just as Yerushalmi wants Freud’s Jewishness, and the Jewishness of psychoanalysis as science, *properly recalled*, marked, in Israel and “nowhere else,” where “the injunction to remember [is] felt as a religious injunction to an entire people.”⁹ What Yerushalmi cannot think, in other words, is a form of repression beyond suppression, and in this way, Derrida suggests, Yerushalmi disavows what Freud will have endeavored to think, not only in his historical novel on Moses, but across the entire body of his work. This would be, for Derrida, the “logic of the unconscious” as he views it, the one crystallized in the model of the Mystic Pad: “the idea of a psychic

⁹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses*, cited in Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 76.

archive distinct from spontaneous memory, of a *hypomnesis* distinct from *mneme* and from *anamnesis*” (AF 19)—in short, a notion of memory irreducible to any simple act of remembrance or recollection. And this because, Derrida writes, “a repression also archives that of which it dissimulates or encrypts the archives” (AF, 66).

The “structural justification” (AF, 78) for Freud’s historical novel, for Derrida, then, is that Freud shows how Mosaic law cannot constitute itself without repressing the violence in which it actually originates. Formalizing this logic in a way that, he claims, “crosses psychoanalysis with deconstruction, a certain ‘psychoanalysis’ with a certain ‘deconstruction,’” Derrida speaks of the manner in which the law “keeps and erases the archive of this injustice that it is. Of this violence that it does” (AF, 78).

This is, in any case, what Derrida takes from *Moses and Monotheism*, even as he wants to suggest that, at the same time, at the level of its institutional history, Freudian psychoanalysis cannot but repeat this logic, cannot constitute itself without repressing something, in the attempt to dictate a legacy whereby “all his inheritors, the psychoanalysts of all countries, have united themselves as a single man to follow him” (AF, 95).

Violence and Law

There is a link, then, between the deconstruction of the law Derrida attributes to Freud in *Archive Fever* and Derrida’s approach to the problem of law and violence in his essay on “the mystical foundation of authority” (the phrase borrowed from

Pascal), “Force of Law”¹⁰—although Derrida, I hope to show, also attempts to differentiate his own thinking on this issue from Freud’s. To put it somewhat roughly, what “Force of Law” will show is that the *instituting* violence of the law is intimately bound to the *preservation* of the law, and this thought—which we will have to elaborate in more detail—will have certain consequences, Derrida will argue, for the idea of justice, including the idea of justice that animates, he claims, deconstruction itself (FL, 254). Stated simply, then, Derrida’s own approach to the intimate relation between violence and law attempts to pursue explicitly the consequences of this thought.

In “Force of Law,” Derrida will, in effect, approach the problem of the intimate relation of law and violence through a reading of Walter Benjamin. The paradox Derrida explores there has to do with the fact that the law must carry with it a certain authority, but this authority has its basis in an

originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have authorized itself by any anterior legitimacy, so that, in this initial moment, it is neither legal nor illegal—as others would quickly say, neither just nor unjust. (FL, 234)

This is the problem Derrida pursues in his reading of Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” and which is the focus of my attention here. I will have less to say about what I would call, even if Derrida himself would not, the “programmatic” text of “Force of Law,” the portion Derrida actually delivered at Cardoza Law School, on the

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 228–298. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

relations between deconstruction and justice or, as he puts it, “justice as the possibility of deconstruction” (FL, 243). What Derrida will attempt to bring out of Benjamin is first of all the precise structure of this relation between violence and law—this is what, along with Freud, Benjamin will allow Derrida to think, we might say—but then, beyond this, he will follow Benjamin in asking whether it is then possible to conceive of justice, that is, a form of *justice beyond law*.

Let us begin, then, with the relation between violence and law as Derrida’s reading of Benjamin traces it. Analyzing modern law in view of a “critique” of violence, Benjamin is attempting to render a judgment on the law’s monopoly on violence, and a judgment on whether or not, in certain instances, what he wants to call “sovereign” violence might be justified, outside of the idea that it might serve as a means to a just end. Benjamin will speak of two forms of violence in the general sphere of law: the *founding violence* that posits and institutes law, and the *preserving violence* that is necessary to maintain it, the one that underwrites its enforceability. But crucially, Derrida will try to show that these two forms of violence are not simply opposed; *Derrida’s* approach to the problem of law and violence is to be located here, in this reading that demonstrates that, despite Benjamin’s insistence on this basic distinction, Benjamin cannot avoid conceding that the two cannot be properly or rigorously distinguished in the end. If this distinction will not hold, Derrida will argue, this is because, as Benjamin presents it, “*the violence called founding violence is sometimes ‘represented,’ and necessarily repeated, in the strong sense of that word, by the*

preserving violence” (FL, 260). To the notion of founding violence—which Benjamin will call “mythic” violence, which Derrida reads to mean “Greek”—Benjamin will ultimately contrast another form of violence, a radically destructive “divine” violence that annihilates law, the *just* violence that does away with all existing laws—Derrida will read this “divine” violence in terms of a specifically Jewish form of divinity. But at this stage, I want to remain with the first opposition traced here, the opposition between founding and preserving violence.

What Derrida finds in Benjamin’s text, it seems to me, is a “deconstruction” of the founding principle of law akin to the one he attributes to Freud. For like Freud, Benjamin posits an intimate relation between violence and the law; indeed, what Benjamin wants to analyze, from the critical perspective of a “destruction” of the philosophy of law, is the violence *of* law, the violence that is integral to law. The prohibition on individual violence of European law, Benjamin suggests, is necessary not because this violence is a threat to any given law, but because it threatens the juridical order itself and its *monopoly* on the use of force, its sole claim to the use of force. The prohibition on violence thus lays bare “a certain violence of the law that lays itself down” (FL, 267). But the exemplary example for Benjamin, Derrida shows, is the right to strike, insofar as it is “*the only one* that allows us to conceive the homogeneity of law and violence” (FL, 268). With the right to strike, a legal subject is granted a right to a form of violence, even if it appears nonviolent, because what the strike demands is a change in the order of things, and thus the strike is in effect,

for Benjamin, a form of violence pitted against the violence of the law. To speak of a “right” to a certain violence conceded *by law*, then, is to speak of something that threatens to undo the law not from outside but from within: here, “Violence is not exterior to the order of law. It threatens law from within law” (FL, 268). From this standpoint, the greatest threat to the state is *founding* violence that would posit a new state of things, that would institute a new order of the law; in so doing, this founding violence repeats, or calls up, the violence at the origin of the order of law it upends.

Again, we find the structure whereby “that which threatens law already belongs to it” (FL, 269). Derrida draws out the consequences of this threat of founding violence:

These moments, supposing we can isolate them, are terrifying moments because of the sufferings, the crimes, the tortures that rarely fail to accompany them, no doubt, but just as much because they are in themselves, and in their very violence, uninterpretable or undecipherable. This is what I am calling the ‘mystical.’ As Benjamin presents it, this violence is certainly legible, even intelligible since it is not alien to law...But it is, in law, what suspends law. It interrupts the established law to found another. This moment of suspense, this *epokhe*, this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of nonlaw. But it is also the whole history of law. (FL, 269)

Benjamin wants to distinguish, in the end, between the intelligibility of founding violence that suspends the law and the truly revolutionary moment of divine violence that does away with law, because the arrival of divine violence, he wants to say, is *not recognizable as such* to man. Knowledge and certainty of the arrival of pure revolutionary (divine) violence as such is not accessible to “man,” according to Benjamin. But prior to what this other distinction opens up, Derrida is saying, the first distinction between founding violence and preserving violence already seems to

adhere to a certain deconstructive logic, even if this is not the explicit object or theme of Benjamin's text.

Preserving violence, too, will lay bare the violence that the law is, for Benjamin, only now we are dealing not with the limit case, so to speak, but with how the law is exercised, how it maintains itself.¹¹ The exemplary example here, on Derrida's reading, the one that seems to best suit Benjamin's interest in disclosing the violence in which law consists, is the example of the modern police. The problem with the police in the modern state, for Benjamin, is its "constitutive hypocrisy" (FL, 276). The police *are* the state, insofar as one cannot take issue with the police (not any given police action, but the police *itself*) without taking issue with the state of order within the state in its entirety; accordingly, they play a crucial role in enforcing the law and thereby preserving it. The problem, however, is that the police do not simply enforce the law: more often, it seems, they invent it, intervening in situations where legal rights remain unclear. In Derrida's words, "The police arrogate the right, arrogate the law, each time the law is indeterminate enough to open a possibility for them" (FL, 277). Hence their "constitutive hypocrisy": they take on the right to legislate the law rather than simply to enforce it.

¹¹ Here Benjamin wants to take his distance from a pacifist critique of the state. The use of military force, while it clearly puts on display the state's monopoly on force, is not as open to critique as pacifists would like to think, Benjamin suggests, since it is always legal and functions solely, it is said, to preserve the law.

But equally, then, the example of the police simultaneously puts into question the distinction Benjamin has been trying to draw between founding and preserving violence; the example Benjamin turns to is thus an example, we might say, of deconstruction at work. Benjamin, then, seems to acknowledge this—the example of the police evidences something problematic about the sphere of law, and Benjamin remarks on this explicitly—but does not seem to reflect on what this does to the critique he is carrying out. This concession, Derrida suggests, prefigures the conclusion that Benjamin will come to: that all the problems of law remain bound to a notion of violence as means, as a means to a given end, and so the sphere of law remains *undecidable* with regard to violence itself (Derrida reads Benjamin’s reference to the indeterminacy of legal problems as “the undecidability [*Unentscheidbarkeit*] of all problems of law” [FL, 285]). But he does not reflect on what this means for the fundamental distinction he has drawn between founding and preserving violence. “The possibility, which is also to say the ineluctable necessity of the modern police force,” Derrida writes, “ruins, in sum—one could say deconstructs—the distinction between these two kinds of violence that nevertheless structures the discourse Benjamin calls a new critique of violence” (FL, 277).¹²

To put it roughly, this will have certain consequences—consequences I will try to spell out in a moment—for the crucial distinction Benjamin wants to draw between

¹² Derrida continues, “Such discourse Benjamin would like either to found or to preserve, but in all purity he can do neither. At most, he can sign it as a spectral event. Text and signature are specters, and Benjamin knows it, so well that the event of the text ‘*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*’ consists of this strange *ex-position*: before your eyes a demonstration ruins the distinctions it proposes” (FL, 277).

founding (mythic) violence and revolutionary, divine violence—divine violence introducing the possibility of justice. But even prior to this step, Derrida suggests, there is already a kind of deconstruction of law that is not simply what Benjamin calls a “destruction” of law at work in Benjamin’s text. And this deconstruction of law consists, I would say, in showing that there is no pure positing of law that does not include, already, the necessity of its preservation. Derrida would say the ineluctable necessity. What “ruins” the distinction, according to Derrida, is iterability. That is, the very structure of founding violence, of the foundational moment more generally (in Freud’s text as much as in Benjamin’s), is such that it necessarily includes or calls for a certain repeatability. Why? Because, by itself, the moment of founding violence is a moment that strictly speaking belongs neither to the order it interrupts, nor to the new law which it aims to found, which will only be determined after the fact. The moment of founding violence does not answer to the order of law it disrupts, but it is not yet justified by the law it would posit: “It is the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone” (FL, 270). The moment of founding violence is itself, as we saw already, a moment of suspension, which will only be justified and determined as a *founding* positing after the fact, by the law it will inaugurate. Derrida refers, then, to the “aporetic structure” at the origin of the law, and it should be clear that we are dealing here with a temporal aporia (FL, 270).¹³ This temporal aporia contaminates the

¹³ This general structure is evident as well in Derrida’s thinking on the “to come,” the *avenir*, the

foundational moment with the necessity of a certain repeatability, the necessity of a certain preservation in what comes after the originary moment:

Iterability makes it so that the origin must repeat itself originarily, must alter itself to count *as origin*, that is to say, to preserve itself. Right away there is the police and the police legislates, not content to enforce a law that would have had no force before the police. This iterability inscribes preservation in the essential structure of foundation. (FL, 278)

To put it another way, if founding violence at the origin is only determined as such after the fact, then it is founding violence only to the extent that it can be preserved *as the origin of the law*, by the order of law that legitimates it retroactively.

Thus there will always be the necessity of preservation in the very founding of the law, and from the other side, there will always be a way in which the preservation of the law repeats the founding violence that institutes it. There will always be a legislative violence that goes beyond the simple enforcement of the law in the enforcement of the law. This contamination of what apparently distinguishes foundation and preservation, Derrida writes, “this is what I would call deconstruction at work, in full negotiation: in the ‘things’ themselves and in Benjamin’s text” (FL, 275). There is, then, a deconstruction—a deconstruction of law akin, it seems to me, to the one Derrida attributes to Freud—already at work in the thought of founding and preserving violence, prior to the appeal to justice, prior to the turn to everything Benjamin wants to think under the heading of “divine” violence. What Benjamin’s text allows Derrida to think, I submit, is the aporia at the origin of the law, the

promise, and messianicity in his later work.

“mystical foundation” of its authority. But equally, it allows him to think the way in which the founding of the law is necessarily contaminated by a kind of repeatability—so that the law not only originates in an originary violence, it repeats this violence necessarily. Thus if the intimate relation between law and transgression emerges as a critical point of proximity between Derrida and Freud, it is because, for Derrida, what Freud demonstrates ultimately is, precisely, that “this archontic principle...only posited itself to repeat itself and returned to re-posit itself only in parricide” (AF, 95).

The Idea of Justice

But Derrida, following “Benjamin”—the quotation marks made necessary by the fact that Derrida is in actuality following a logic Benjamin’s text stages, as it were, despite itself—will attempt to take another step. It would seem that such a step is called for, insofar as the example of “deconstruction at work” I have been speaking of here seems to analyze a classical conception of law without really displacing it; in Benjamin’s terms, it seems more like a “strategy of rupture” rather than a “general strike” (recall that in the discussion of the right to strike the general strike is defined as a violence that would change the whole order of things).¹⁴ Derrida even likens these terms to the two “temptations” of deconstruction itself (FL, 271). But this alternative is too simple, Derrida will suggest, and itself calls for a kind of

¹⁴ “Can what we are doing here resemble a general strike or a revolution, with regard to models and structures, but also modes of readability of political action? Is that what deconstruction is? Is it a general strike, or a strategy of rupture?” (FL, 271–272). This is the alternative that will not hold, that calls for deconstruction.

deconstruction; and this is precisely what the step “beyond” the deconstruction of the law in the direction of a certain “idea of justice” will try to pursue. To put it simply, Derrida will pursue the consequences of this deconstruction of law he traces in Benjamin’s text for the idea of justice, and we might even say for the “ethics” of deconstruction, for the idea of justice that is said to be the possibility of deconstruction. But in order to do so, he will, again, follow the path indicated in Benjamin’s text, insofar as he will ask what deconstruction might take from the thought of divine violence.

In fact, the attempt to formulate a new critique of violence leads Benjamin to ask whether there is perhaps another kind of violence beyond the founding violence and preserving violence he identifies in the sphere of law: what Benjamin hopes to isolate is, then, a kind of pure, decidedly just violence beyond law. There is another kind of violence, he thus suggests, the one exemplified by the mythic violence of the gods. Only, for Benjamin, this mythic violence is not just: it founds a law, by force, a law whose basis is not justice but the *power* of the gods, their privilege to posit a new order of things. Mythic violence is essentially another form of founding violence; violence is unleashed in this instance with a view to founding a new law. For Benjamin, the only form of violence that is truly pure and just is the divine violence of God, a divine violence wholly distinct from mythic violence. If mythic violence founds the law, divine violence annihilates it; if the principle of mythic violence is

power, the principle of divine violence is *justice*—divine violence is exercised, Benjamin wants to show, for the sake of life.

Commenting on the fact that Benjamin seems to distinguish the principle of justice from the principle of power by suggesting that it consists in destruction without bloodshed, Derrida writes: “divine violence sacrifices life to save the living, for the sake of the living” (FL, 288). Nevertheless, Benjamin wants to suggest, this does mean that in annihilating law divine violence makes every human crime legitimate. On the contrary, insofar as it commands respect for the living, divine violence imposes a “thou shalt” beyond law. A “thou shalt” that is “beyond law” in the precise sense that it offers no criterion for making a decidable judgment, just or unjust, on any given human crime. What the “thou shalt” demands, for Benjamin, it seems, is ultimately only a certain respect for the living, and as such it does not offer what Derrida calls “good conscience”: as Robert Bernasconi has shown, Derrida means here the certainty of a moral program.¹⁵ Instead, it leaves to the individual and the community a certain responsibility to decide what is just and unjust in any given instance. Indeed, the very notion of responsibility consists, Derrida underscores, in the absence of such a rule; its condition is, precisely, “the absence of general criteria and automatic rules” (FL, 288).¹⁶ Benjamin thus invokes a whole Jewish tradition of

¹⁵ Robert Bernasconi, “Justice Without Ethics?” *PLI, Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6 (1997), 60. See also Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 19.

¹⁶ In this instance, the “thou shalt” issues a command that is in every case singular and includes no criterion for judging human crimes from the standpoint of a universal. Indeed, there are strong indications throughout “Force of Law” that the difference between law and justice itself could also be

commentary that refuses to prohibit murder in self-defense. The very idea of justice on this view, Derrida is suggesting, is such that it does not consist in the simple application of the law or a given rule.

And this would be, then, what Benjamin's critique of violence would have been leading towards: the possibility of a decidedly just violence, of another order, a properly revolutionary violence that annihilates law. We arrive, then, at another opposition:

All undecidability is situated, blocked in, accumulated on the side of law, of mythological violence, that is to say the violence that founds and preserves law. But on the other hand all decidability stands on the side of the divine violence that destroys the law, we could even venture to say, that deconstructs the law. (FL, 290)

But Derrida will show that, despite appearances, divine violence itself also remains somehow undecidable, even if this is ultimately for different reasons. If a "decision" regarding divine, revolutionary violence—which is to say, a decision as to when violence is in fact revolutionary and not another form of the violence that would found a new order of law—is not possible, it is because, as Derrida puts it, "the determinant decision, the one that allows knowing or recognizing such a pure and revolutionary violence *as such*, is a *decision not accessible to man*" (FL, 291). The divine violence of God is just, but it is not recognizable as such to "man": "only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be

thought of in terms of the difference between the universal and the singular; or to put it another way, another name for "justice itself" would be *absolute singularity*. The problematic of singularity arises primarily in "Force of Law" in Derrida's formulation "*tout autre est tout autre* [every other is wholly other, or alternately, each other is another other]" (FL, 293). See also Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 77.

in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men.”¹⁷ And if this is the case, we now have *two* forms of undecidability, and two aporias. In the case of mythic, founding violence, in the case of the law, we have knowledge and certainty concerning the form of violence we encounter there, but there is no true decision as to whether violence is just or unjust. In the case of divine violence, we have a justice beyond law, but “*without decidable knowledge*” (FL, 291), since it remains unrecognizable or unintelligible as such beyond its “incomparable” effects.

Thus we see here, staged in Benjamin’s text, the relation between law and justice Derrida formalizes in the first part of “Force of Law.” Because the law is bound up with violence, justice is always called for. But the very idea of justice, for Derrida, is such that it is not reducible to the application of general rules and methods.¹⁸ Whenever it is a question of justice, Derrida writes, “Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely” (FL, 251).¹⁹ Thus there can be no certainty as to whether a particular intervention is just. An intervention in the name of justice

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 300.

¹⁸ When Derrida speaks of justice beyond law, Martin Hägglund writes, “The point is that decisions concerning justice cannot be reduced to a rule for how the law should be applied... The condition of justice is thus an essential contingency.” Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 40.

¹⁹ Earlier in the essay, Derrida puts the problem this way: “Law is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the *decision* between just and unjust is never insured by a rule” (FL, 244).

is always, in some sense, undecidable. Every intervention includes the possibility of injustice, or the possibility of more violence. In this sense, as Martin Hägglund has theorized, justice for Derrida is autoimmune: “The risk of injustice is inscribed in the very possibility of justice, which means that it cannot be a question of eliminating injustice once and for all.”²⁰

Deconstruction is animated, Derrida argues, by just this idea of justice. On the one hand, there is deconstruction as a strategic interruption of the classical conception of law, but one which remains unable to condemn it or to leave it behind once and for all. On the other hand, there is deconstruction *as justice*, as what makes possible an intervention.²¹ But deconstruction does not operate in view of properly absolute justice. What Derrida shows in “Force of Law,” even if he does not spell it out in his reading of Benjamin, is that deconstruction analyzes the violence that inheres in the law, in view of a certain idea of justice, but does not open onto a certain decision that could be properly determined as just or unjust in advance or absolutely.²² This is what Derrida means, I think, when he says “Deconstruction takes place in the interval

²⁰ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 43. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

²¹ This phrase “deconstruction as justice” is admittedly awkward, but what it tries to capture is the manner in which Derrida at times associates deconstruction itself with justice. For example: “The fact that the law is deconstructible is not bad news. One may even find in this the political chance of all historical progress. But the paradox that I would like to submit for your discussion is the following: it is this deconstructible structure of law or, if you prefer, of justice as law, that also ensures the possibility of deconstruction. Justice in itself, if such a thing exist, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exist. *Deconstruction is justice*” (FL, 243).

²² It is in this sense, I think, that Geoffrey Bennington writes, “Deconstruction cannot be ethical, cannot propose an ethics, but ethics might nonetheless provide a privileged *clue* for deconstruction, and deconstruction might provide a new way of thinking about some of the problems traditionally posed by ethics.” Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2000), 34.

that separates the undeconstructibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law.” (FL, 243).²³ As soon as deconstruction comes to be defined in terms of the relation between justice and law, it equally begins to be defined in terms of “the *experience* of *aporia*” (FL, 244).

Derrida’s Final Return to Freud

Deconstruction, then, attempts not only to analyze the violence that inheres in the law, but attempts to rethink justice, and in this way, it distinguishes itself from psychoanalysis. This is, I would suggest, what Derrida ultimately suggests in the last lecture on Freud he delivered, “Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul,” presented to the Estates General of Psychoanalysis in 2000.²⁴ The key moment here is to be found in Derrida’s reading of Freud’s “Why War?” (1933). What Derrida will pick up on in Freud’s response to Albert Einstein on the role of the League of

²³ As Charles Shepherdson characterizes this paradox, deconstruction operates on the basis of this infinite idea of justice, yet “no deconstruction of the law will establish, codify, or institutionalize justice and put an end to the violence that inheres in the actual historical instantiation of the law. Like justice, therefore, deconstruction remains suspended in a certain way, which means that *both justice and deconstruction* fall outside any finite inscription... Thus both justice and deconstruction are perpetually unfulfilled, out of reach, *impossible*, and therefore always *called for*, always *necessary*....” Charles Shepherdson, “Derrida and Lacan: An Impossible Friendship,” *differences* 20.1 (2009): 53. For Shepherdson this has two consequences: first, that deconstruction must always remain incomplete (“deconstruction is never accomplished, never completed, and must always be renewed”), and thus deconstruction must always begin anew and repeat itself; and second, even if the arrival of justice remains impossible, the law no longer looks the way it first appeared, prior to deconstruction. Nevertheless, deconstruction remains, on this view, “suspended” in the sense that it must repeat itself insofar as it never will transcend or go beyond the metaphysical tradition it deconstructs; “as if,” Shepherdson writes, “haunted by the return of a certain philosophical traumatism.” Shepherdson, “Derrida and Lacan,” 43. The “experience of the *aporia*,” in other words, marks the experience of an impasse, and Shepherdson sees something like a bad infinity at work here, one which bespeaks a kind of repetition compulsion that deconstruction will never have come to terms with. This is a line of thinking that I try to take my distance from in this chapter.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Psychoanalysis Searches the States of Its Soul: The Impossible Beyond of a Sovereign Cruelty,” in *Without Alibi*, trans. and ed. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 238–280. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

Nations is what we might simply call his pessimism.²⁵ Freud speaks of the “lust for aggression and destruction” (SE 22: 210) that seems to be everywhere evident, and thus he returns, Derrida underscores, to the notion of a destructive drive indissociable from the death drive (PS, 269). The question of law and violence in psychoanalysis, Derrida suggests here, always comes back to the theory of the death drive.

The death drive, Freud suggests, becomes a drive towards destruction when it is turned toward the outside, turned on others. And in being linked to this fundamental force, there is for Freud no possibility of eradicating aggression and violence. Rather, it can only ever be a question of finding ways of diverting this tendency so that it can be expressed in other ways. “Our mythological theory of instincts makes it easy for us to find a formula for *indirect* methods of combating war” (SE 22: 212), Freud writes, methods that would try to counter this tendency by strengthening the bonds between individuals that Eros works to construct. This would be one way, he suggests, of potentially bringing some form of reason to bear on the unruly drives (SE 22: 213). For Derrida, this is key. To begin with, it suggests the necessity of “*continuous* transaction with an inflexible force” (PS, 273)²⁶, but perhaps more importantly, it suggests to Derrida “a leap into the ethical”:

Even though Freud does not say it, certainly not in this way, this concept of the *indirect* seems to me to take into account, in the mediation of the detour, a radical discontinuity, a heterogeneity, a leap into the ethical (thus also into the juridical and the political) that no psychoanalytic knowledge as such could

²⁵ Einstein’s letter to Freud is reprinted in the Standard Edition. See SE 22: 199–202.

²⁶ “Freudian philosophy of culture, civilization, or history...always comes back to this motif: teleology of a progress by *indirect* displacement and restriction of the forces of the drives” (PS, 272).

propel or authorize. On the subject of the polarity love/hatred...Freud says clearly in fact that, like the polarity preservation/cruel destruction, it must not be hastily submitted to ethical judgments evaluating “good and evil.” (PS, 273)

What Derrida sees in Freud’s text is something like the necessity of an ethical intervention even though such an intervention entails a kind of undecidability. What we find here, then, Derrida seems to suggest, is something like the idea of ethics that deconstruction gives rise to. An ethical intervention is called for, but there is no certainty as to this intervention. And this because Freud knows that “there is no life without the competition between the forces of two antagonistic drives” (PS, 273). Hence Freud’s suggestion, Derrida underscores in “Psychoanalysis Searches,” that we must continually negotiate with the death drive and it can never be a question of eradicating it. Such a lack of certainty is implied in Derrida’s notion of “undecidability.” As Derrida suggests in “Force of Law” and *Specters of Marx*, from 1993 (a text that develops the notion of justice formulated in “Force of Law”), no intervention in the name of justice might be determined in advance as intrinsically just.²⁷ Martin Hägglund puts it this way: “Derrida emphasizes that one always acts in relation to what cannot be predicted, that one always is forced to make decisions even though the consequences of these decisions cannot finally be established” (RA, 81). Because every decision necessarily includes the possibility of injustice, “Any kind of decision (ethical, political, juridical, etc.) is more or less violent” (RA, 82).

²⁷ “Otherwise justice risks being reduced once again to juridical-moral rules, norms, or representations, within an inevitable totalizing horizon,” Derrida writes. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34.

And yet, Derrida suggests—in a move that we saw Derrida making already in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (see Chapter 1)—Freud does not entirely think through what he is doing here, he does not *reflect on* what he is doing at this stage. Freud seems to glimpse that the very condition of an ethical intervention here is a certain undecidability that undercuts the possibility of knowing whether this intervention is just. But at this very moment, Derrida suggests, Freud turns back on this line of thinking.

At the very point at which he recalls that there is no ethical evaluation in the description of the polarities of the drives and no sense in wanting to rid oneself of the destructive drives, without which life itself would cease, Freud continues, and clearly this is important to him, to find in life, in organic life, in the self-protective economy of organic life, and thus in one of the poles of the polarity, the roots of the whole ethico-political rationality in whose name he proposes to subjugate or restrict the forces of the drives. (PS, 274)

At this very moment, in other words, Freud takes a step back and tries to ground this ethical stance in a certainty. He appeals to the idea of a transcendental right to life, to the fact that “everyone has a right to his own life” (SE 22: 213). Here he seems to posit that an ethical intervention would be one that protects life—even though, according to the theory of the drives, in order for there to be life there must also be something like a drive towards death and a fundamental aggressivity. To protect life from death absolutely, accordingly, would put an end to life. Ultimately, Derrida suggests in “Psychoanalysis Searches,” Freud disavows the ethical implications of his own thinking on the death or destruction drive. Freud, we ought to read Derrida as

saying, points in the direction of an ethics that entails a certain undecidability, but he does not really reflect on, or think through, what he is doing in this.

Lacan and the Ethics of Psychoanalysis

To the extent that, for Derrida, Freud's thinking on the emergence of the moral law marks one of the places where we see a kind of "deconstruction at work," Derrida's elaboration of this problem in "Force of Law" can be productively read, I think, alongside the work of Lacan, who explored this dimension of Freud's thinking at length, primarily via a reconsideration of ethics in psychoanalysis. I will begin here, then, by outlining Lacan's approach to the question of the foundations of the law in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, before turning to how Lacan himself attempts to think through the consequences of this problem.

To put it in fairly broad terms, the rereading of Freud Lacan developed in Seminar VII would place unconscious desire at the very center not simply of Freud's theory but also the practice of analysis. Lacan turned to the question of ethics at a moment when he was outlining the manner in which a kind of confrontation with what one cannot recognize, one's desire, and not its adjustment or normalization, is at the core of psychoanalysis. In the previous year's seminar, he had taken up this issue in relation to the role of interpretation in analysis, but in 1959, he decided to take up the theme of ethics broadly understood. If, in Seminar VII, Lacan attempted to show how Freud's thinking upends traditional ways of thinking about the aim of analysis,

on the one hand, and our ideas of the good in general, on the other, this was because it was part of challenge to the psychoanalytic movement in France and elsewhere which was, as the historian of psychoanalysis Elisabeth Roudinesco has written, “in the process of converting to mass production.”²⁸ Thus Lacan would present himself, here as elsewhere, as *returning* to Freud, reaffirming what is truly revolutionary in Freud’s thinking. Just as the discussion of Derrida above could not avoid dealing with his reading of Benjamin, then, my discussion of Lacan here will not be able to avoid dealing with Lacan’s rearticulation of Freudian metapsychology: for Lacan, the genealogy of law we find in Freud has an *essential relation* to certain key aspects of Freudian metapsychology, perhaps above all the prospect of what lies beyond the pleasure principle. Indeed, Lacan’s project in Seminar VII could be fairly concisely characterized as an attempt to think through what this means for the “ethics of psychoanalysis”—understood here as the ethics of the practice of analysis but also the broader notion of ethics psychoanalysis offers.

Like Derrida, Lacan emphasized the “paradoxical” character of Freud’s account of the emergence of the law in the myth of the primal horde: namely, that the founding of the law necessarily and originally entails a repression, the repression of a violence, a “transgression,” that thereby forms the very condition of the law. In this way, for Lacan as for Derrida, the prohibition of the law is founded on a “mystical” aporia, an

²⁸ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 253. Surveying the psychoanalytic movement on the eve of 1960, Roudinesco writes, “the movement Freud had founded resembled a multinational company made up of various corporate bodies.” Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, 252.

aporia in which its authority as unconditional and absolute actually originates. Lacan, however—reading Freud from the perspective of a psychoanalyst whose task is that of training other analysts—stressed the manner in which this foundational myth rearticulates an apparent contradiction at the center of Freud’s second topography—the model of psychical agencies (the ego, id, and superego) that ultimately comes, in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), to replace Freud’s earlier vision of the psychic apparatus comprised of different psychical systems (unconscious, preconscious, and conscious). From the beginning, Lacan underscores in Seminar VII, Freud is clear that the punishing severity of the superego originates in the destructiveness and aggressivity its command is meant to abolish: “at the heart of everything Freud taught,” Lacan states, “one finds the following: the energy of the so-called superego derives from the aggression that the subject turns back on himself.”²⁹

In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), written three years after *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which Freud outlines the structural account of the psychic apparatus, the superego, or “ego ideal,” is said to originate initially in a primary identification with paternal authority (SE 19: 31). This identification, Freud underscores, is not the product of a libidinal object-choice. Rather, it is a crucial form of identification that takes place earlier than any such choice (SE 10: 31). The superego, according to Freud, is in essence a “precipitate” (SE 19: 34) of this identification installed within the ego itself, one which actually retains the character of the paternal figure. The capacity of the

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), 194. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

superego to dominate the ego is even reinforced, Freud theorizes, with the repression of the Oedipus complex, and its strength is exercised thereafter in the form of a strict moral conscience. The difficulty, however, resides in accounting for the excessive cruelty of the superego, its “extraordinary harshness and severity” (SE 19: 53), which is experienced by the ego as a punishing sense of guilt. In order to address this difficulty, Freud offers another hypothesis: in the process of identification with paternal authority, a portion of the aggressivity and destructiveness originally present in the relation to such a figure is unleashed on the ego.³⁰ Hence “the general character of harshness and cruelty exhibited by the [ego] ideal—its dictatorial ‘Thou shalt,’” Freud writes (SE 19: 55).

Freud returns to this account several years later in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. According to the theory of culture Freud offers here, if there is “discontent” in civilization it is first and foremost because it imposes restrictions on us: it is quite simply “built up upon a renunciation of instinct” (SE 21: 97). Indeed, at the center of civilization, Freud theorizes, is a restriction on the human inclination to aggression—“the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct,” Freud writes—which, Freud affirms, “is an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition” (SE 21: 122). And so the question quickly becomes how civilization inhibits this fundamental tendency towards aggression. The question, in other words, is what happens in the

³⁰ In the technical terms of psychoanalysis, Freud speaks of a particular form of sublimation at work in the identification with paternal authority, a “desexualization” (SE 19: 54) of libido, itself a fusion of Eros and the death drive. This sublimation effects what Freud terms an “instinctual defusion” (SE 19: 54), or uncoupling, whereby the destructiveness originally associated with the sublimated libido comes to be unleashed on the ego.

individual to render his desire for aggression innocuous?" (SE 21: 123). The answer, he writes, can only be that

[his] aggressiveness is introjected, internalized; it is, in point of fact, sent back to where it came from—that is, it is directed towards his own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego, which sets itself over against the rest of the ego as superego, and which now, in the form of "conscience," is ready to put into action against the ego the same harsh aggressiveness that the ego would have liked to satisfy upon other, extraneous individuals. (SE 21: 123)

Moral conscience, here, originates in the aggressivity the individual turns back on himself, internalizing it in the form of a moral agency within, "like a garrison in a conquered city," Freud writes (SE 21: 124). The severity, indeed the cruelty, of the superego thus stems from this fundamental tendency towards aggression; Freud ultimately refers to the toll exacted by the "sadistic" superego (SE 21: 136).

If there is this apparent paradox at the heart of Freud's account of the origins of the moral law of civilization, on the one hand, and his account of moral conscience, on the other, Lacan suggests in Seminar VII, then, it is on account of the fact that, for Freud, there simply is no natural inclination towards goodness in "men." This comes through most clearly, I think, in Freud's discussion in *Civilization and Its Discontents* of the ideal of love for one's neighbor. Because when Freud turns his attention to the religious demand to "love thy neighbor as thyself," when he begins to weigh what is at stake in this imperative, his "bewilderment" is unmistakable (SE 21: 109). "Why should we do it?" he asks, "What good will it do us? But, above all, how shall we achieve it? How can it be possible?" (SE 21: 109). What the imperative commands

does not seem possible, Freud writes, not simply because my neighbor is a stranger to me, but because he is in fact hostile to me:

He seems not to have the least trace of love for me and shows me not the slightest consideration. If it will do him any good he has no hesitation in injuring me, nor does he ask himself whether the amount of advantage he gains bears any proportion to the extent of the harm he does to me. Indeed, he need not even obtain advantage; if he can satisfy any sort of desire in it, he thinks nothing of jeering at me, insulting me, slandering me and showing his superior power... (SE 21: 110)

And yet, what strikes Freud as scandalous or impossible, so to speak, about the commandment to love thy neighbor, beyond the fact that my neighbor is undeserving and hostile towards me, is that it is fundamentally at odds with what I desire. “The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow,” he writes, “is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved” (SE 21: 111). Rather, they are “creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness” (SE 21: 111). The command to love one’s neighbor is one that asks “men” to love someone who

is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*. (SE 21: 111)³¹

If adhering to the command to love my neighbor appears impossible to Freud, then, it is not simply because the neighbor is, at the core, unworthy of love, but rather on account of the “uncivilized” aggressivity and destructiveness, the evil as Lacan will

³¹ For Lacan’s detailed discussion of the import of the *homo homini lupus* in Freud’s thinking, see his essay on “A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology” in the *Écrits*. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006). Derrida touches on Lacan’s reading of the adage in his seminar on “The Beast and the Sovereign.” See Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Vol. 1*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 97–105.

call it, that lurks in me. This is, in the end, Freud suggests, what traditional ethical thought has been so quick to disavow: even in analytic circles, he notes, there is resistance to “talk of the inborn human inclination to ‘badness,’ to aggressiveness and destructiveness, and so to cruelty as well” (SE 21: 120).

Thus in Seminar VII, Lacan will in effect suggest that the fact that there is no natural goodness in men reveals something about what animates all human action at the most basic level: unconscious desire. As Lacan reads Freud’s commentary here, “every time that Freud stops short in horror at the consequences of the commandment to love one’s neighbor, we see evoked the presence of that fundamental evil which dwells within this neighbor” (S7, 186). “But if that is the case,” Lacan continues, “then it also dwells within me. And what is more of a neighbor to me than this heart within...?” (S7, 186). The religious injunction to love one’s neighbor, Lacan suggests, ultimately forces us to confront not just the evil that dwells in others, but also the evil that lurks in ourselves. As he puts it, the commandment raises the problem of the evil my neighbor desires, but it equally raises “the problem of the evil I desire” (S7, 187).

For Lacan, then, Freud’s discourse on the neighbor points to a fundamental feature of Freudian metapsychology, namely that whatever it is that desire aims at, it is not the good. At the center of Freud’s thinking, according to Lacan, we find a particular stance on one’s relation to the good. Indeed, “we always return to Freud,” Lacan proposes, “...because he started out with an initial, central intuition, which is ethical

in kind” (S7, 38). The “ethical” dimension of Freud’s thinking here, then—“the ethics of psychoanalysis” as Lacan theorizes it—concerns something beyond the account of the origins of the moral law of civilization Freud offers, as well as his account of the origins of moral conscience in the “categorical imperative” of the superego (SE 19: 35). Rather, it concerns, perhaps above all, the way in which psychoanalysis posits the presence of unconscious desire at the core of the subject, the way it points to something “in me more than me,” as Lacan would put it several years later in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*. Thus, Joan Copjec writes, the “ethics of psychoanalysis” is centered elsewhere than one might suspect:

The ethics of psychoanalysis follows from its fundamental critique of ontology, from the theory of the drive and sublimation by which it displaces philosophical inquiries into the ontology of the subject. This ethics concerns the subject’s relations to these small pieces of being, not primarily its relation to other people or to the Other.³²

As Lacan’s treatment of the encounter with the neighbor suggests, however, even if, as Copjec writes, the relation to others is not at the center of this ethics, it nevertheless has implications for how we understand our relations to others. I will return to this issue in what follows. But for now, I simply want to underscore the following: for Lacan, if there is an “ethical” intuition at work in Freud’s thinking, it is because, from the very beginning, psychoanalysis situates unconscious desire at the heart of human action. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we could say that it serves as the guiding principle of our actions, and yet, one that seems to have little to do with the good.

³² Joan Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 9.

Already in the “Project” of 1895, Lacan suggests in Seminar VII, what Freud’s model of the psyche offers is something close to what the word “ethics” itself implies in its proximity to the term *ethos*: not simply the presence of an imperative or an obligation (which Lacan tends to associate not with ethics, but with morality), but rather an ideal of conduct, an articulated measure of our action, including in the precise sense of something that serves to point out “a direction, a trajectory,” a path (S7, 3).³³ The “ethical” dimension of Freud’s thinking concerns just this path, a kind of directive as to where one must go. For Lacan, this dimension is at the heart of Freud’s thinking from the very beginning, and it defines his approach from the outset. In the inaugural analysis of the dream of Irma’s injection, for instance, and all of the analyses of his own dreams we find in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Lacan suggests, whenever Freud encounters the place where something has been forgotten or elided, this is the place, he says, where something of absolute importance must be located, there is where analysis must go.³⁴

³³ In fact, Lacan distinguishes between morality and ethics at the very out set of Seminar VII: “In speaking of the ethics of psychoanalysis, I chose a word which to my mind was no accident. I might have said ‘morality’ instead. If I say ‘ethics,’ you will soon see why. It is not because I take pleasure in using a term that is less common” (S7, 2).

³⁴ See Seminar 11 on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. There Lacan returns to the “ethical status” of the unconscious: “The status of the unconscious, which, as I have shown, is so fragile on the ontic plane, is ethical. In his thirst for truth, Freud says, *Whatever it is, I must go there*, because, somewhere, this unconscious reveals itself. And he says this on the basis of his experience of what was, up to that time, for the physician, the most rejected, the most concealed, the most contained, reality, that of the hysteric, in so far as it is—in a sense, from its origin—marked by the sign of deception.” Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, ed. J.A. Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton: 1981), 33.

What psychoanalysis proffers as a measure of our action, for Lacan, is, again, desire. It offers, from the very beginning, Lacan suggests, not a commandment above all others—the Kantian maxim “act in such a way that your action conforms to the desire that is in you,” say—but a glimpse at what guides the subject in all his or her actions, namely what Freud calls *a wish*, an “imperious *Wunsch*,” an “intimate specificity,” in Lacan’s terms (S7, 24). Even if this holds for all human subjects, what Freud calls the wish is absolutely singular, according to Lacan, insofar as “Nothing can be compared to it that allows it to be judged from the outside”:

The *Wunsch* does not have the character of a universal law but, on the contrary, of the most particular of laws—even if it is universal that this particularity is to be found in every human being. We find it in a form that we have categorized as a regressive, infantile, unrealistic phase, characterized by a thought abandoned to desire, by desire taken to be reality. (S7, 24)

It might very well seem, on this basis, that psychoanalysis is the search for a restorative ethic, one that proceeds by means of a return to this thought “abandoned to desire” and aimed, if not at its liberation, if not at the harmonious reintegration of the instincts and the return to “relations without repression,” as Lacan would later put it, then at its normalization. But at its core psychoanalysis implies something else entirely, according to Lacan.³⁵ Why? Because, Lacan insists, the very “backbone” of Freud’s thought is the fundamental opposition between the primary process operative at the level of the unconscious and the secondary process (characteristic of the preconscious and consciousness); this opposition being reconfigured, ultimately, in

³⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 30.

the opposition between the pleasure principle and its correlate, the reality principle (S7, 25–6).

The claim here is that Freud glimpses something early on in the opposition between the primary process and the secondary process that necessitates that there can be no question of returning to and reintegrating that at which desire aims. What Freud glimpses, Lacan suggests, is that this opposition—and later, the functioning of the reality principle in deferring of the discharge of psychic energy sought by the pleasure principle—functions so as to maintain a certain distance between the subject and the primary object of his or her desire, what Lacan calls, after Freud, “the Thing.” What subtends human action, here, is a conflict between a tendency towards the discharge of psychic energy (the pleasure principle) and something that works to rectify it, to correct and compensate for it, something that seeks to “[avoid] the occurrence of catastrophes that would inevitably follow the lapse of too much or too little time or the abandonment to its own devices of the pleasure principle” (S7, 29).

This compensating mechanism is none other than the reality principle, which is tasked with the avoidance of those types of discharge that would threaten the stability of the psychic apparatus. For Lacan, Freud’s conception of the psychic apparatus operating according to the dictates of the pleasure and reality principles can be understood, then, as a schema in which human action is regulated by a certain measure of the good, where what occupies the position of the good is, precisely,

pleasure. Hence Lacan's claim in Seminar VII that "the opposition between the pleasure principle and the reality principle or between the primary process and the secondary process concerns not so much the sphere of psychology as that of ethics properly speaking" (S7, 35). The opposition between the pleasure principle and the reality principle "concerns the sphere of ethics" to the extent that it poses—at the most basic level of Freud's metapsychology—the properly "ethical" question of the relation of pleasure to the good. But if this is the case, Lacan suggests, matters are more complicated than they might appear, insofar as, on Freud's view, our relationship to this good called pleasure is inherently problematic. And this because, as I have indicated, the reality principle functions so as to actually prevent access to it. For Lacan, however, this function can be traced back to a form of primary defense central to the formation of the psychic economy, a defense, he specifies, "that already exists even before the conditions of repression as such are formulated" (S7, 31).

To put it simply, what Lacan will try to show in the Seminar is that the function of the reality principle has to originate somewhere. It has to emerge from the very first "apprehension of reality," the apprehension in which the outside is established *as* outside, prior to which there is neither inside nor outside. What Lacan has in mind here is a primary differentiation at the level of psychic reality—a differentiation founded on the encounter with that which is experienced as *alien*. As Lacan reads Freud's early "Project for a New Scientific Psychology" (1895), the first apprehension of reality takes place in the encounter with the *Nebenmensch*, the

complex of that which is neighborly insofar as it is “beside yet alike” (S7, 51). Prior to the possibility of the perception of what is external as object, Lacan suggests, of what is exterior to the subject, a certain complex of the object (the object as such, not any particular object) must be established, and the complex of the object only comes into being, for Lacan, on the basis of an original division carried out at the level of psychic reality. This division will be a cleavage internal to the complex of the *Nebenmensch*. In this division, “the *Ding* is the element that is initially isolated by the subject in his experience of the *Nebenmensch* as being by its very nature alien, *Fremde*” (S7, 52).

This “first outside,” the product of this internal division, is what reality-testing, the negotiation with the world of things in order to procure satisfaction, actually originates in, according to Lacan. And this would be, then, what Freud means when he says, famously, that the finding of an object is always in fact the refinding of an object.

The whole progress of the subject is then oriented around the *Ding* as *Fremde*, strange and even hostile on occasion, or in any case the first outside. It is clearly a probing form of progress that seeks points of reference, but with relation to what?—with the world of desires. It demonstrates that something is there after all, and that to a certain extent it may be useful. Yet useful for what?—for nothing other than to serve as points of reference in relation to the world of wishes and expectations; it is turned toward that which helps on certain occasions to reach *das Ding*...

The world of our experience, the Freudian world, assumes that it is this object, *das Ding*, as the absolute Other of the subject, that one is supposed to find again. It is to be found at the most as something missed. One doesn't find it, but only its pleasurable associations. (S7, 52)

In sum, the very first encounter with the outside, Lacan is suggesting, is the encounter with something originally excluded: *das Ding*, that which is strange, foreign, hostile. The sphere in which human action unfolds, then, is founded on a primary expulsion internal to subjectivity as such—the Thing is that which, while it is situated at the very core of the subject as subject of desire, is nevertheless alien to it (“the absolute Other of the subject,” as Lacan puts it in the passage above). The pursuit of the good regulated by the pleasure and reality principles, in other words, consists in the pursuit of a series of objects which are only useful to the extent that they are pleasure-bearing avatars of the Thing, which even if it is constantly sought, can never be found, because it is, by its very nature, *lost*, excluded. What’s more, to the extent that *das Ding* names something originally excluded from the psychic economy regulated by the pleasure and reality principles, it figures a “beyond the pleasure principle” situated at the very core of subjectivity itself. Subjectivity is sustained, on this view, by the exclusion of the Thing, it originates in a form of defense from the Thing. To come into contact with the Thing would threaten the entire psychic construction based on its exclusion.

If psychoanalysis offers a kind of measure of human action, then, it is unconscious desire, operating in accordance the pleasure principle, where *das Ding* occupies the position of what Aristotle called the Sovereign Good. The Sovereign Good, here, ought to be understood as that which against which all other goods are measured. The originally foreclosed pleasure associated with the Thing, Lacan suggests, is the

Sovereign Good towards which all human action is oriented, even if it must remain forever out of reach (S7, 42). He ultimately puts it this way:

Well now, the step taken by Freud at the level of the pleasure principle is to show us that there is no Sovereign Good—that the Sovereign Good, which is *das Ding*...is a forbidden good, and that there is no other good. Such is the foundation of the moral law as turned on its head by Freud. (S7, 70)

This notion of the Thing as the Sovereign Good is, I would say, at the center of Lacan's rearticulation of philosophical ethics in Seminar VII. If, for Lacan, Kant is the one who indicates where the limits of ethics lie, it is because he attempts to found an ethics on the notion that, when it comes to what ought to serve as the measure of human action, there is no Sovereign Good—that the Sovereign Good or the good as such is, like the Thing, originally and necessarily inaccessible.³⁶ And yet, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Lacan suggests, the Sovereign Good is not only inaccessible, it is threatening: a certain distance must be maintained between me and the Thing. The Thing is what is at the very core of my subjectivity—it is another instance of something “in me more than me”—but which I cannot go near, precisely because subjectivity itself is founded on its exclusion. Coming into contact with the Thing, that which determines my desire and forms the most intimate part of my being—the Thing is that which absolutely *singularizes*—would put me in touch with a potentially deadly something “beyond the pleasure principle.” Indeed, in Seminar

³⁶ “It remains for us to see that is in the same place that something which is the opposite, the reverse and the same combined, is also organized, and which in the end substitutes itself for that dumb reality which is *das Ding*—that is to say, the reality that commands and regulates. That is something which emerges in the philosophy of someone who, better than anyone else, glimpsed the function of *das Ding*, although he only approached it by the path of the philosophy of science, namely, Kant. In the end, it is conceivable that it is as a pure signifying system, as a universal maxim, as that which is the most lacking in a relationship to the individual, that the features of *das Ding* must be presented” (S7, 55). See also S7, 79.

VII, we see Lacan beginning to supplement his earlier approach to the death drive: Freud's theory of the death drive, Lacan suggests here, in fact points to the presence in the psyche of something like the Thing.³⁷

A certain distance between the subject and the Thing is necessary, according to Lacan, then, to the extent that it invokes what lies beyond the pleasure principle, the destructive force of what Freud called death drive and of what Lacan calls *jouissance*. What Freud glimpses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lacan proposes, is simply that there is something else at work in the psyche beyond the interplay of the pleasure principle and the reality principle. The functioning of the pleasure principle and the reality principle allow, that is, a kind of homeostatic equilibrium to be achieved within the psychic apparatus, the "optimum tension" necessary to the maintenance of life (S7, 51). The pleasure principle and the reality principle operate, then, by maintaining a certain level of excitation, but there is beyond this, Lacan suggests, the possibility of an excess of excitation that is strictly unbearable. As I read Lacan, this disruptive excess is what he would come to call *jouissance*. As such, the Thing is, in Lacan's terms, "the object as object of *jouissance*" (S7, 203). Even if it is perpetually sought after, it embodies, so to speak, a destructive, absolutely "uncivilized" *jouissance* that threatens the whole psychic economy, and which thus has nothing to do with my well-being. Human desire aims at something, we ought to understand

³⁷ Lacan sums up his account of the death drive at this stage in his thinking this way: "I simply want to say that the articulation of the death drive in Freud is neither true nor false. It is suspect; that's all I affirm. But it suffices for Freud that it was necessary, that it leads him to an unfathomable spot that is problematic, since it reveals the structure of the field. It points to the site that I designate alternatively as impassable or as the site of the Thing" (S7, 213).

Lacan to be saying, that has nothing to do with self-preservation. As we saw in Freud's discussion of the injunction to love one's neighbor, the Thing I ultimately desire has nothing to do with the good of any other, but first and foremost, on this reading, it has nothing to do with my own good.

What we see in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Lacan thereby suggests, is that at the core of my being there is a kind of monstrous *jouissance* that I cannot come near. What is most intimate to me is this Thing which evokes an "uncivilized," unbound *jouissance* that is, from any other standpoint, *evil*—characterized by perverse, destructive aggression and cruelty. The commandment to love one's neighbor raises the problem, in Lacan's words, of "the evil I desire" (S7, 187). It forces us to come into contact with something malignant and terrifying: as Lacan puts it in the passage I discussed above, "this heart within which is that of my *jouissance* and which I don't go near" (S7, 187). Indeed, it forces us to confront a desire for something situated beyond the concern for one's own well-being or self-preservation, something that in effect threatens life (where life would be understood as untouched by death). Thus I seek to maintain a distance between me and the Thing, I seek to protect myself, by turning the aggression associated with it back on myself. Moral conscience, here, is a kind of bulwark that prevents me from ever approaching the domain of the Thing. As Lacan reads Freud, the moral law of civilization actually functions *not* to ensure the good of my neighbor—or, for that matter, the good of the community—but rather as a mechanism of defense. Its function, Lacan states, is ultimately that of "regulat[ing]"

the distance between the subject and *das Ding*” (S7, 69). That is, it serves to keep me a safe distance from the malignant, transgressive *jouissance* situated at the very core of my being, in the place of the Thing. The moral law that for Freud defines civilization, here, is founded on what it is meant to intercede: destructive aggressivity and cruelty. In some sense, then, “lawless” desire is the very condition of the moral law on this view. It remains “walled up”—to echo Derrida’s phrase in “Force of Law”—within the very structure of the law. What Lacan elicits from Freud here, I am suggesting, is a certain “deconstruction” of the law, an attempt to think through the aporia we come upon when we examine its foundations. And this has certain consequences, he will suggest, for the ethics of the practice of analysis, on the one hand, and for ethics more broadly, on the other.

In Seminar VII, we see Lacan attempting to think through what Freud’s “deconstruction” of the law means at the level of the practice of analysis, at the level of the encounter between analyst and analysand at the heart of psychoanalysis, a space in which, we might say, “everything is permitted” (with its commitment to the rule of free association). In short, the “ethics of psychoanalysis” as Lacan presents it is one founded on the proposition that, for any and every subject, there is no Sovereign Good, and this is in fact implied in the very structure of subjectivity, it is implied in what it means to be a desiring subject. There is only the absolutely singularizing nonrelation to the Thing, to something originarily and necessarily foreclosed. “The question of the Sovereign Good is one that man has asked since

time immemorial,” Lacan says in one of the final sessions of the Seminar, “but the analyst knows that it is a question that is closed. Not only doesn’t he have that Sovereign Good that is asked of him, but he also knows there isn’t any” (S7, 300).³⁸ All psychoanalysis can do, then, is confront the analysand with his or her desire, the desire aimed at this Thing. And it cannot offer a rule to live by, a rule as to what I ought to do, precisely insofar as it insists on, as we have seen, the essential “constructedness” of every rule concerning what I *ought* to do with my desire.³⁹ Psychoanalysis, it follows, equally cannot offer any promise with regard to what one should do to remain in the good, cannot offer any promise of happiness. The particular relation one maintains to his or her desire, however, need not always be the same: there is always the possibility in analysis of what the analyst Moustapha Safouan refers to as “modifying the libidinal economy.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the ethics of psychoanalysis consist in a kind of “nonpromise” with regard to happiness and the good.⁴¹ And this is, for Lacan, precisely what Freud’s thinking demands, the ethical stance it dictates.

³⁸ Lacan goes on to say “What the analyst has to give, unlike the partner in the act of love, is something that even the most beautiful bride in the world cannot outmatch, that is to say, what he has. And what he has is nothing other than his desire, like that of the analysand, with the difference that it is an experienced desire” (S7, 300).

³⁹ See Marc de Kessel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan’s Seminar VII*, trans. Sigi Jöttkandt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 247.

⁴⁰ Moustapha Safouan, *Four Lessons of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Anna Shane (New York: Other Press, 2004), 94.

⁴¹ I draw here on Charles Shepherdson’s treatment of the affinities between Derrida and Lacan. Shepherdson, “Derrida and Lacan: An Impossible Friendship,” 70.

At the same time, in Seminar VII, Lacan points towards what Freud's thinking means for ethics as it has been traditionally understood. Indeed, what Lacan in effect demonstrates in his reading of Freud's discourse on the neighbor is that the only position psychoanalysis can take with regard to what we *ought* to do in the name of the good—whether it be my own, someone else's, or the common good—is to show us what is concealed behind the ideal of love for one's neighbor, namely that my desire is *not* aimed at the good. But far from liberating us and opening up the way to the reclamation of our rightful enjoyment (this word roughly translating what Lacan calls *jouissance*) or a harmonization of our relation to ourselves—whereby Lacan's treatment of ethics would be reduced to the injunction “not to give ground on your desire” understood as a reassuring alibi—this in actuality points to the necessity of a certain distance from it, from something “in me more than me” but which I cannot go near.⁴²

This disclosure, however, has implications for how we ought to understand our relations to others. To see this, we ought to recall that, for Lacan, Freud's discussion of the neighbor raises the problem of the “evil I desire” and the “evil that dwells within this neighbor.” Slavoj Žižek has gone a considerable way, I think, in clarifying what Lacan's thinking suggests on this issue.⁴³ Because, from a

⁴² My reading of Lacan here draws on de Kessel's helpful account of Lacan's trajectory in Seminar VII. See de Kessel, *Eros and Ethics*, 166.

⁴³ Slavoj Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence,” in Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 134–190. Hereafter cited parenthetically. It should be noted that Žižek takes up this line of thinking in Lacan in a different way than does Alenka Župancic, whose

psychoanalytic perspective, Žižek suggests, the encounter with the neighbor is the moment when I come into contact with another's desire, thus something that always remains fundamentally alien. In this moment, Žižek writes, "the Neighbor remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence... The core of this presence, of course, is the Other's desire, an enigma not only for us, but also for the Other itself" (NOM, 141). On this view, the encounter with the neighbor will always be, in a certain sense, traumatic: the neighbor appears to us a fellow human being, and yet beyond this "there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be 'gentrified'" (NOM, 143). Thus the moral law Freud associates with "civilization," Žižek suggests, functions to introduce "a minimum of regulation," as he puts it, into this essentially problematic relationship to the neighbor (NOM, 140). That is, the function of the moral law, here, is ultimately to regulate human relations in such a way that this threatening neighbor remains at a certain distance.

Drawing out the implications of what Lacan has to say about the figure of the neighbor, Žižek allows us to see what Lacan's thinking suggests with regard to ethics. Because of a fundamental aggressivity and cruelty, because human desire is in conflict with the well-being of oneself or one's neighbor, something like an ethics is always called for. It is not, for Lacan or for Freud, that the command to love one's neighbor is the ideal ethical intervention; it is, rather, that this command reveals a

work on Lacan and the "ethics of the drive" is more reliant on Lacan's discussion of Kant in Seminar VII and in his essay, included in the *Écrits*, "Kant avec Sade." See Alenka Župancic, *Ethics of the Real* (New York: Verso, 2000).

broader issue, I think. An ethics is always necessary because, as Lacan's discourse on the neighbor seems to suggest, in some sense, there is no relation to the neighbor without it. On this view, if the neighbor necessarily appears to me as threatening and other, an idea of ethics is what intervenes in this "impossible" encounter to make it such that the neighbor is someone "to whom I can relate as a human partner" (NOM, 144). It is always called for in my dealings with the neighbor, as well as my dealing with all the other neighbors. But if this is the case, it can nevertheless never be a question of eradicating aggression and cruelty once and for all, since this is the condition of ethics. Ethics, here, consists not in the pursuit of an absolute good—not even the absolute protection of life—but in a form of continual negotiation with this threat.

The Question of Ethics

Why read Derrida alongside Lacan here? Because, I want to suggest, Lacan's approach to the problematic of ethics in Freud sheds some light on what Freud's thinking suggests as to any possible ethics. That is, it brings into focus, I think, the *question*, as opposed to something that would be stated in the form of a thesis, of ethics after Freud. I would like, in this final section, to explain further what I mean here.

Like Derrida, and before him, Lacan finds in Freud something like a “deconstruction” of the moral law.⁴⁴ Lacan demonstrates how for Freud the law remains bound to the “transgression” in which it actually consists, the injustice that actually makes or founds the law. But Lacan also shows how this deconstruction of the moral law is tied to a kind of nonpromise, at the level of the practice of analysis but equally at the level of ethics as it has traditionally been understood. Lacan’s reading of Freud underscores, in other words, the manner in which Freud’s thinking fundamentally refuses any notion of an absolute good or of absolute justice—and this for reasons that are irreducible, as Lacan demonstrates. In this way, what Lacan shows is that even if, as Derrida maintains, Freud’s discourse is always divided (recall Derrida’s discussion of Freud in *Archive Fever* on the way Freud simultaneously repeats the very logic he seems to displace), Freud opens up the question of ethics we find Derrida attempting to think through. That is, the very question that Derrida claims Freud did not really manage to think. What Lacan shows, I would submit, is that Freud opens up this question even if he did not, and would not, pose the question in the same way as Derrida does.

⁴⁴ Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that Derrida never said more about this, apart from a comment made only in passing in his late seminar on the theme of “The Beast and the Sovereign.” In *The Beast and the Sovereign, Vol. 1*, Derrida suggests that “having doubts about responsibility, decision, one’s own being-ethical, can be, or so it seems to me, and ought perhaps to remain, the indefeasible essence of ethics, of decision, and of responsibility.” And if this is the case, he continues, “the point would be to elaborate another ‘logic’ of decision, response, event,” one that is “less incompatible,” Derrida says explicitly, with what Lacan has to say in places about the responsibility of the analyst in analysis. See Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Vol. 1*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 169–170.

There is, as Derrida himself suggests in places, a certain debt to psychoanalysis in his thinking on law and justice, on violence and ethics. But then Derrida sets out to differentiate his own thinking from Freud's. Nevertheless, what Lacan shows is that Freud's thought, if it implies such a thing as "an ethics of psychoanalysis," comes close to Derrida's insistence on the "undecidability" of any intervention in the name of justice, and the impossibility of any ethical decision that could be properly and legitimately determined, in advance, as just or unjust. As Lacan shows, Freudian psychoanalysis does not offer an ethical program; it undercuts the very idea of an ethical formula or categorical imperative. My aim here is not to conflate deconstruction and psychoanalysis, but to insist on the way—beyond even those ways that Derrida himself spoke about—deconstruction is entangled with psychoanalysis.

But if this is the case, then the question of ethics I have been exploring here would in the end, as Geoffrey Bennington has suggested, have to be attributed neither simply to Derrida, nor to Freud, but to their relation.⁴⁵ I am taking up Bennington's point here, in my own way, because it seems to me that it has not yet truly been thought through, in particular within the field known as "Derrida studies." The continually open, "undecidable" question of ethics would be posed and explored in a type of thinking that, as Derrida himself writes in *Archive Fever*, "crosses psychoanalysis with deconstruction, a certain 'psychoanalysis' and a certain 'deconstruction'" (AF, 77).

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, 108–109.

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